STRATEGIC REALITY & TACTICAL MIRAGES:

SPECIAL OPERATIONS & THE IRANIAN HOSTAGE RESCUE, 1979-1980

BY

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The undersigned certify that this thesis meets master's-level standards of research, argumentation, and expression.

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DISCLAIMER

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author. They do not reflect the official position of the US Government, Department of Defense, the United States Air Force, or Air University.

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ABSTRACT

The Iranian hostage rescue attempt—dubbed Operation Eagle Claw—is an often cited but less understood mission that contributed to the creation of United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) in 1987. This thesis discards conventional conclusions on the nature of failure, asserting that most assume a Rational Actor Model, and thus, most lessons learned presume rationality in government decisions. Using Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow's Models of decision making from their work *Essence of Decision*, the thesis explores alternative explanations on *why* the rescue mission failed using the Organizational Behavior and Government Politics Models of decision making. After further scrutiny, the Government Politics Model reveals an asymmetric need for OPSEC by President Carter's National Security Advisor. The desire for secrecy resulted in organizational imperatives by the military that ultimately limited preparation for the audacious mission. As SOF continues to provide presidential administrations options in opaque political environments, like Eagle Claw, senior leaders—both solider and statesman—must recognize the tension between the growth of SOF quantity to meet increasing strategic demand and the attrition of SOF quality by organizational imperatives. The management of this dilemma will characterize the future of SOF.

CONTENTS

Introduction

> *Over the past decade, the United States' military and
> the country's national security strategy have come to
> rely on special operations to an unprecedented degree.
> As identifying and neutralizing terrorists and insurgents
> has become one of the Pentagon's most crucial tasks,
> special operations forces have honed their ability to
> conduct manhunts, adopting a new targeting system
> known as "find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, and
> disseminate." They have adopted a flatter
> organizational structure and collaborated more closely
> with intelligence agencies, allowing special operations
> to move at "the speed of war."*
>
> Linda Robinson
> *Foreign Affairs*

Since 11 September 2001, United States Special Operations
Command (USSOCOM) has risen to a preeminent position in the U.S.
Defense establishment. This meteoric rise has its roots in the calamity
at a windblown Iranian desert landing zone from three decades ago. The
failed rescue attempt of fifty-two American hostages from the embassy in
Tehran, Iran, dubbed Operation Eagle Claw, had an asymmetric
influence on the United States' special operations and joint force
composition.[1] In its aftermath, an official inquiry headed by Admiral
James L. Holloway led directly to the establishment of United States
Special Operations Command in 1987.[2] The failed rescue mission was
the impetus for modern special operations forces (SOF) organization and
other joint initiatives, such as the Goldwater-Nichols Act and the Cohen-
Nunn Amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act of 1987
(NDAA).[3] While the Goldwater-Nichols Act placed emphasis on joint

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[1] U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report." August 1980, VI.
[2] Cogan, "Desert One and Its Disorders," *The Journal of Military History*, January 2003,
201.
[3] "Goldwater Nichols DOD Reorganization Act of 1986 - Goldwater-
NicholsDoDReordAct1986.pdf."

operations, the Cohen-Nunn Amendment reorganized all SOF into a unified combatant command, ostensibly allowing it to move at "the speed of war."[4] The past decade of special operations achievements can trace its flatter organizational structure and intelligence collaboration directly to lessons learned from Operation Eagle Claw. From improved command and control to the necessity of full-scale rehearsals, lessons from Operation Eagle Claw resonate throughout the modern Joint Publication 3-05, *Special Operations*.[5]

      With the success of special operations over the last decade, it would seem the seminal SOF mission has little left to teach the modern strategist. However, a further examination reveals there is still much more to learn. Most explanations of the mission's failure, such as the 1980 Joint Chiefs of Staff-directed Holloway Report and subsequent "lessons learned," assume a state-level Rational Actor Model of decision making. Moreover, narratives of the mission focus on either tactical or strategic descriptions, leaving a chasm at the operational level. This study's aim is not to contest previous explanations but to expand understanding by applying Organizational and Government Politics Models, unpacked in Chapter Two of this thesis. These decision making models offer novel lenses through which to view the failed operation and will provide new insights into mechanisms of failure applicable to future special operations employment. In fact, a prominent D.C. think tank asserts, "the [next] President will inherit an increasingly complex security environment and a trendline of increased reliance on SOF."[6] Newly-elected President Donald Trump can attest to this assertion, authorizing a risky raid in Yemen just five days after taking office. The outcome of

"S.2638 - 99th Congress (1985-1986): National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1987 | Congress.gov | Library of Congress."

[4] Robinson, "The Future of Special Operations," *Foreign Affairs*, November 1, 2012.

[5] "JP 3-05, Special Operations - jp3_05.pdf," accessed January 15, 2017, ttp://dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_05.pdf.

[6] Alexander Powell, *Advice from SOF on the Use of SOF for the Next Administration*, Occasional Paper Series (Arlington, VA: CNA, October 2016). 2.

the mission resembled Operation Eagle Claw, with "a chain of mishaps and misjudgments that plunged the elite commandos into a ferocious 50-minute firefight," killing Chief Petty Officer William Owens, injuring three others, and resulted in the destruction of a $75 million Marine MV-22.[7] As presidential administrations continue to rely on special operations for non-traditional missions in complex political environments, organizational and government politics lessons merit further examination, more than ever.

Most studies of Operation Eagle Claw have been from the individual or institutional perspective. Nearly every major player involved in the failed rescue mission has published a memoir or his own version of the failed mission. These works represent the highest levels of strategic policy and the lowest levels of tactical military application, from President Carter's and Cyrus Vance's (Secretary of State under Carter) memoirs to Colonel James Kyle's (On-Scene Commander at the Desert One landing site) perspective from the desert floor. The problem is these viewpoints do not explain *why* the mission failed for three main reasons. First, each author is bound by limited information, a claim nested in the theory of myopic decision making. Second, with their reputations on the line, rarely do national leaders talk negatively about their own performance. Finally, each perspective comes with its own bias, whether institutional, personal, or organizational. So, what can be learned from a systematic analysis of the existing literature? This thesis uses Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow's three models of decision making from their 1999 book *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* to reexamine the decisions of national security players during the Iran Hostage crisis and subsequent rescue attempt. While the Rational Actor

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[7] "Raid in Yemen: Risky From the Start and Costly in the End." *The New York Times*, accessed March 6, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/01/world/middleeast/donald-trump-yemen-commando-raid-questions.html?_r=0.

Model pervades most literature on the event, the Organizational and Government Politics Models of decision making provide a more nuanced understanding of national security decisions, such as those confronted by the Carter Administration. Further, the illustrative power of the new models provides some measure of predictive application for future special operations employment.

By examining Eagle Claw through lenses of decision making the thesis aims to highlight the organizational strengths of SOF units while stressing the perils of larger bureaucracies. The similarities and differences between these types of units within the framework of Operation Eagle Claw lead to interesting questions on the mechanisms of failure. Do Organizational and Government Politics Models provide a more precise answer to *why* Operation Eagle Claw failed? If so, what do these conclusions mean for the future of SOF organizations expansion, and funding? Do SOF missions compress the strategic, operational, and tactical into a unitary whole? If so, what role does this unique structure play in organizational behaviors and outputs? Finally, will new conclusions on *why* Eagle Claw was unsuccessful provide insights for strategic leaders on the future of SOF expansion?

To answer these questions, this study proceeds as follows: the first chapter will provide an historical overview of Operation Eagle Claw. The narrative conveys what shaped the military and geopolitical environment prior to 1980. The overview summarizes the major lessons learned and conclusions reached by the Holloway Commission, that opaque command and control, poor planning, lack of full-scale rehearsals, and operational security (OPSEC) limitations were the direct mechanisms of mission failure.[8] Further, they identified the need for a unified joint task force charged with countering terror.[9] These conclusions influenced

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[8] U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report," 56.
[9] U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report," 61.

policymakers, culminating in the modern SOF organizational structure borne out of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1987.[10] In sum, Chapter One aims to explain *how* Eagle Claw failed. The purpose of this chapter is not to provide a detailed account of the operation, but rather to relay the facts and provide a starting point for further discussion of the mission through Organizational and Government Politics Models.

Chapter Two introduces the decision-making models that aim to explain *why* the mission failed. In structure, this section will unpack the Rational Actor, Organizational Behavior, and Government Politics Models of Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow. Most literature on Operation Eagle Claw assumes a rational actor perspective. The rational actor conclusions, while adequate at describing *how* the Holloway Report reached their deductions on the mechanisms of failure does not explain *why* these factors occurred in the first place. Furthermore, the Rational Actor Model is problematic when trying to expand the theories of failure and their applicability to future operations. Allison and Zelikow's models of Organizational Behavior and Government Politics build upon the Rational Actor Model. The authors characterize government behavior, not as a decision by rational unitary actors, but rather as the interaction and friction between bureaucratic organizations. The premise of the Organizational Behavior Model, particularly for government agencies, rests on the idea that government actions are less deliberate choices and more "outputs of large organizations functioning according to standard patterns of behavior."[11] On the other hand, the Government Politics Model asserts that decisions are made not as organizational outputs but as the result of "bargaining games" between government entities and

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[10] "S.2638 - 99th Congress (1985-1986): National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1987 | Congress.gov | Library of Congress."

[11] Graham T. Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis,* 2nd ed (New York: Longman, 1999). 143.

players, according to Allison and Zelikow.[12] These models move beyond the Rational Actor perspective and provide more nuanced explanations of organizational behaviors. Case studies of Operation Eagle Claw's causal mechanisms of failure through the Holloway Report conclusions provide the most relevant avenue of discourse.

Chapters Three through Five examines how Organizational and Government Politics Models provide new insights into the mechanisms of failure in Operation Eagle Claw. Each chapter will explore a different significant observation of the Holloway Commission. Four central themes are examined: operational security limitations (OPSEC), opaque command and control, insufficient planning, and lack of full-scale rehearsal. The aim of each of these chapters is to provide new ways to explore old answers and conclusions.

Case study chapters will follow a similar pattern of analysis. First, they examine the existing assumptions and conclusions from the perspective of the Rational Actor Model, which is followed by an alternative perspective using the Organizational Behavior, and Government Politics Models where applicable. An analysis of the new insights garnered from the relevant model follows. Organizational behaviors and routines can provide both an explanation of failure and success simultaneously. The case study analysis, however, seeks to identify the specific characteristics of each organization that led to mission failure. Although the official White House statement claimed the causal mechanism for mission abort was "equipment failure," the reasons behind the failure are far more nuanced and best explained through Organizational and Government Politics Models.[13]

The concluding chapter surveys Operation Eagle Claw's continued relevance to current and future SOF organization, employment, and

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[12] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 255.
[13] Mark Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah: The First Battle in America's War with Militant Islam* (New York: Grove Press: Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2006). 468.

policy. Implications and recommendations are offered based on the conclusions of each case study. The mission reinforced the need for an autonomous organization solely responsible for the execution of counterterrorism tasks as well as a complete overhaul of joint military integration and doctrine. Despite the unrivaled success of many of these initiatives, organizational behavior and government politics lessons remain relevant. The success of SOF, combined with the rise in sub-state actors over the previous decades, has paradoxically changed the force structure within special operations, perhaps violating the SOF truth that special operations capabilities cannot be mass produced.[14] In fact,

> When President Obama took office in 2009, United States Special Operations (USSOCOM) consisted of around 56,000 personnel with a base budget of about six billion dollars. When the next President takes office, USSOCOM will consist of around 70,000 people with a base budget of nearly eleven billion dollars. However, SOF have shouldered a high number of casualties over the last eight years and maintaining a high operational tempo (OPTEMPO) that has increasingly strained special operators and their families.[15]

Recent and future expansion indicate that SOF as a smaller more flexible force may eventually be encumbered by the organizational limitations of large government bureaucracies. When combined, the success and growth of SOF make the organizational outputs currently expected less likely to succeed. These imperatives are particularly acute as the organization becomes mired in the push and pull of government politics and national security personalities. While Operation Eagle Claw's organizational lessons influenced the success of the modern SOF structure, it can also point to potential pitfalls. Senior leaders must recognize the tension between the growth of SOF quantity to meet increasing strategic demand and the attrition of SOF quality by

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[14] "SOF Truths." http://www.soc.mil/USASOCHQ/SOFTruths.html
[15] Powell, *Advice from SOF on the Use of SOF for the Next Administration,* 2.

organizational imperatives—the future of special operations depends on managing this dilemma.

Chapter 1

Operation Eagle Claw Overview

Setting the Stage-*How* Did Operation Eagle Claw Fail?

> *In the early dawn of 24 April 1980, in the Iranian desert, a group of some 130 Army Green Berets, Rangers, drivers, and Iranian translators plus some 50 pilots and air crewman were forced to abort the rescue of 53 Americans held hostage in Tehran. The commander on the scene made the decision reluctantly after three of his eight helicopters, for various reasons, were not able to complete the mission. Worse yet, as the evacuation got under way, a helicopter, maneuvering close to the ground, sliced into a large transport plane laden with fuel and ammunition. Both aircraft burst into flames, and eight men died.*
>
> Paul B. Ryan

The path to mission abort on 24 April 1980 did not start on the desert floor of Iran, nor did it begin at the Pentagon in Washington D.C., where planning occurred for the clandestine operation. The road to the devastation at Desert One – the name given to the remote landing site south of Tehran – started after the Vietnam War. The long conflict in Southeast Asia led to public disenchantment with military adventurism and the subsequent slashing of U.S. military forces. Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, home of the "boneyard" where military aircraft are decommissioned,[1] served as a tangible reminder of the reduction in capabilities. By 1973 there were some 6,000 aircraft stored in the facility, the largest sum since the end of World War II.[2] While debates remain on the failures in Vietnam, the military of the 1970s took its share of the blame, manifested in the drawdown of personnel and

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[1] "Davis-Monthan Air Force Base > Units > 309 AMARG."
[2] Chinnery, Philip D. *Air Commando: Fifty Years of the USAF Air Commando and Special Operations Forces, 1944-1994*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Paperbacks, 1997. 268.

equipment. Notably, the Special Operations community was not immune to the personnel and equipment volatility.

The following chapter explains *how* Operation Eagle Claw failed. Starting with the later years of Vietnam, the geopolitical context is explored to provide the framework for the failed rescue mission. Additionally, the Holloway Report conclusions are explained and serve as the basis for further discourse in subsequent chapters. Finally, to scope the analysis of *why* Eagle Claw failed, the Holloway Report's significant observations are split into four categories of inquiry relevant to the models of decision making this thesis explores. The remaining significant observations, such as technological capabilities,[3] are not applicable to this thesis which focuses on decision making by government organizations.

Air Force Special Operations Post-Vietnam Decline

Air Force Special Operations following Vietnam experienced a considerable reduction in both equipment and prestige. Many of the aircraft utilized in Vietnam by Air Force Special Operations were left behind in Southeast Asia, such as the A-1 Skyraiders, AC-119G Shadows, and AC-119K Stingers.[4] Besides the aircraft left in Southeast Asia, many others were transferred to the boneyard, scheduled for deactivation, or not funded beyond 1979. Even the MC-130 Combat Talons later used in Operation Eagle Claw needed modifications.[5] Further, the cadre of experienced, deep-penetration helicopter crewman had departed SOF and transferred to search and rescue squadrons. Worse yet, "there was a feeling amongst pilots and aircrews in the Air

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[3] For the entire list of conclusions and recommendations see pages 57-62 of the Rescue Mission Report. U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report," 1980. 57-62.
[4] Chinnery, *Air Commando*, 268.
[5]Thigpen, Jerry L. *The Praetorian STARShip: The Untold Story of the Combat Talon.* Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: Air UP, 2001, xxx.

Force that Special Operations Force was not a career-enhancing assignment."[6]

In Jerry Thigpen's detailed study of AFSOC's MC-130 Combat Talon weapon system, he notes a reduction in SOF personnel from 10,000 to 3,000 by 1979,[7] just one year prior to the execution of Operation Eagle Claw. Besides the sharp reduction in forces, many SOF units only narrowly avoided deactivation, such as the 1st and 7th SOS, both overseas Combat Talon squadrons.[8] Organizational issues went beyond deactivation as Air Force leaders waffled over Major Command (MAJCOM) ownership of Air Force SOF units. Tactical Air Command (TAC) was the parent MAJCOM for SOF assets, and their fatigue of the unconventional warfare mission was emblematic of the entire Air Force's thoughts on SOF personnel. In sum, Air Force SOF units faced "the very real prospect of not surviving the post–Vietnam drawdown."[9] While the Air Force reduced special operations personnel and equipment, the Army's response was mixed.

Army Special Operations Post-Vietnam

Army Special Forces played a large role in the early years of the Vietnam conflict, primarily through their actions as advisors to the irregulars who "came to understand and respect the Special Force advisory role."[10] However, as the war in Southeast Asia was increasingly characterized by the use of large-scale conventional forces, a reduction in

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[6] Chinnery, *Air Commando*, 268.
[6] Chinnery, *Air Commando,* 268.
[7] Thigpen, *The Praetorian STARShip,* 184.
[8] "By the end of 1975, the entire Air Force SOF capability had been cut to one undermanned wing (the 1st SOW) at Hurlburt Field, Florida, with three squadrons assigned (the 8th, 16th, and 20th SOSs), and two Talon squadrons stationed overseas (the 1st and 7th SOSs). Barely 3,000 personnel remained in SOF during the late 1970s." Thigpen, *The Praetorian STARShip,* xxxii.
[9] Thigpen, *The Praetorian STARShip,* 160.
[10] Francis Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces: 1961-1971* (Washington DC: Department of the Army, 1973). 167.

the use of Special Forces followed, foreshadowing the Army's composition after the conflict when the seven Green Beret Groups from Vietnam shrank to three.[11] On the other hand, a growing fear of radical terrorism by the mid-1970s led officials in the Pentagon to appoint Charlie Beckwith, a Special Forces Vietnam veteran, to form a new unit focused on direct action and counter-terrorism rather than the advisor-teacher role often associated with SOF in Vietnam. Beckwith's experience training with the British Special Air Service (SAS) made him a suitable officer for the task.[12] The plan to build Beckwith's force involved a four-phase assessment process, and Beckwith estimated a total of two years to build his team.[13] Established on 17 November 1977, the Combat Applications Group (CAG) became the first dedicated counter-terrorism unit of its kind in the U.S. Each service was taking a different stance on the SOF mission, the Army reduced and reorganized, the Air Force reduced, and the nature of joint operations remained in flux.

The State of Joint Operations

Williamson Murray in his article, "The Evolution of Joint Warfare" notes, "When the war ended in early 1973, the U.S. military was in shambles. Poorly disciplined, riven by racial strife, disheartened by defeat, and reviled by civilian society, each service had to put its own house in order during a period of downsizing, fiscal constraints, and changing missions."[14] The joint warfare problems that plagued the U.S. military throughout Vietnam saw little improvement afterward. Each

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[11] Chinnery, *Air Commando*, 268.
[12] For a detailed account of Beckwith's time with the British SAS see pages 11-40 of his memoirs. In 1962, an exchange program existed between the SAS and the 7th Special Forces Group. The two elite units would trade an officer and a noncommissioned officer and spend a year training with the other unit. Beckwith, Charlie A., and Donald Knox. *Delta Force: A Memoir by the Founder of the U.S. Military's Most Secretive Special-operations Unit.* New York: William Morrow, 1983. 11-40.
[13] Beckwith, Knox, *Delta Force*, 103-133.
[14] Williamson, Murray, "The Evolution of Joint Warfare." *Joint Force Quarterly*, Summer 2002. 36.

service retrenched in a manner analogous to the fragmented fighting that took place in Vietnam. For example, the U.S. Air Forces bombing campaign and the ground war suffered from disjointed strategies. Similarly, the theater Commander, General William Westmoreland, deployed Marines to Central Vietnam rather than the Mekong Delta where their amphibious training and skills were more likely to succeed. Moreover, the Air Force became a slave to metrics of effectiveness and the bombing campaign rather than support to the ground troops.[15] Besides internal feuds, all the Armed Services faced a sharp reduction in budget, personnel, and equipment as well as the public backlash of a controversial war in Southeast Asia.[16] These factors led to the "hollow force" of the late 1970s, a term defined as: "military forces that appear mission-ready but, upon examination, suffer from shortages of personnel, equipment, and maintenance or from deficiencies in training."[17] The "hollow force" may appear adequate on paper but shortcomings quickly arise once asked to perform. Such was the case for the execution of Operation Eagle Claw in 1980. While each military service struggled to survive, global terrorism was on the rise.

The Rise of International Terrorism

With the military reeling, a new threat outside the United States grew, multiple terror events within smaller nations frequently occurred in the 1970s to include several attacks on U.S. diplomats. Attacks occurred nearly every year following the Vietnam War; from Cyprus to

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[15] Murray Williamson, "The Evolution of Joint Warfare," 36.
[16] "Unfortunately, almost without exception, the United States has gotten that transition [post-war drawdown] wrong. After every "war to end all wars," the American people have demanded a "peace dividend" that often cuts too deep too long, ruining military preparedness and goading opportunistic foes. This helps explain the Soviet outlook in 1979, after the Pentagon's dramatic post-Vietnam drawdown."
James Kitfield, "The Risks of Military Drawdowns." *National Journal*, July 28, 2012.
[17] Andrew Feickert and Stephen Daggett, "A Historical Perspective on 'Hollow Forces' - R42334.pdf." *Congressional Research Service*, January 31, 2012. 1.

Kabul, U.S. diplomats across the globe became targets of radicals.[18] The Nixon and Ford Administrations, steeped in the great power politics of the Cold War, were at a loss on how to respond to this sub-state violence. Iran, a nation vital to Washington's strategy to stifle Soviet influence in the Middle East, was in the midst of a revolution by 1978. Ayatollah Khomeini and his cadre of Shia fundamentalists were channeling popular outrage against the Iranian Shah and his brutal police force, the SAVAK.[19] To make matters worse, Iranians were in rebellion against Western materialism and moral values.[20] The upheaval should not have been a surprise considering the American economic and material status in 1979. As David Farber remarked in *Taken Hostage*, "Nobody outside the Nation's borders looked at America with pity."[21] By 1980, the poorest twenty percent of American households were wealthier than the richest twenty percent of nations in the world, save a few.[22] These material factors, combined with President Jimmy Carter's inexperience in foreign policy, led to the characterization of the "American Satan" by Ayatollah Khomeini.[23] Modern authors such as Mark Bowden declare the Iran hostage crisis as America's first battle with militant Islam.[24] While history provides perfect hindsight, President Carter's administration did not suspect the Shah's goals of Westernization in Iran would lead to revolution, or worse, the eventual departure of the Shah in January of 1979.[25]

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[18]Paul B. Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission: Why It Failed* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 9.

[19] "SAVAK (SAZman-I lttili'at va Amniyat-I Kishvar; in English, National Security and Information Organization), the Shah's security force. A brutal unit known for torture and murder." Farber, David R. *Taken Hostage: The Iran Hostage Crisis and America's First Encounter with Radical Islam.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2006. 36.

[20] Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 6.

[21] Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 18.

[22] Farber, *Taken Hostage,* 18.

[23] Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 8.

[24] Mark Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah: The First Battle in America's War with Militant Islam* (New York: Grove Press: Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2006).

[25] Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 6.

Carter Administration Political Response to Iran

Typical of many presidential foreign policy interactions, the Carter Administration's response to Iran was mixed.[26] On the one hand, the relationship was badly stressed, manifested by multiple anti-Western protests and threats to embassy safety. On the other hand, U.S. interests in the region were vast, including access to Iranian oil and American commercial contracts. For example, companies such as Bell Helicopter had an exchange of American-made military equipment with the Iranian armed forces.[27] Cyrus Vance, Secretary of State for President Carter, noted in his memoirs, "As the power struggle mounted, we remained watchful, doing what we could to stabilize relations with the new government."[28] Tensions between the governments reached a boiling point on 14 February 1979. As order began to deteriorate in Tehran, revolutionaries seeking revenge for the suspected U.S. harboring of SAVAK officers forced their way into the U.S. embassy, taking some seventy Americans hostage and demanding the return of the deposed Shah for execution.[29] The Iranian government convinced the revolutionaries to release the Americans but not before injuring two U.S. Marines and killing an Iranian employee. The 14 February event was an indicator of things to come.[30] With an increase in friction between President Carter and the newly formed Iranian government, the U.S. sharply reduced the staff at the embassy from some 1,400 to about 50.[31] As President Carter reduced his staff, the Iranian revolution grew. By

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[26] "The Carter administration did not ignore Iran during this period but it was not perceived as a hot spot. It was supposed to be stable, a source of security, and the Shah was supposed to be a friendly face in an often-hostile part of the world." Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 80.

[27] Cyrus R. Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983). 368.

[28] Vance, *Hard Choices*, 368.

[29] Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 7.

[30] Ryan*, The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 7.

[31] Vance*, Hard Choices*, 368.

May of 1979, Khomeini would lead crowds of 150,000 chanting, "Death to Carter."[32]

President Carter's response to Iran following the 14 February incident did not include vast changes to the previous policy and was highly criticized. In fact, according to Cyrus Vance, embassy employees "were to maintain contact with the new government and provide Washington with current analysis of the bitter political struggle for control of the revolution."[33] As relations "normalized," the embassy increased security through uniformed police patrols. The Carter Administration also sought ways to increase regional security through joint exercises and an increased presence of naval deployments to the Indian Ocean. Despite attempts to stabilize relations, the Carter Administration's biggest misstep loomed. The Shah, now in Mexico, was suffering from malignant lymphoma and required treatment in the U.S. President Carter, weighing the balance of humanitarian aid to the Shah and the safety of the embassy personnel, allowed him to enter the U.S. for treatment in late October. Despite improvements in security and careful diplomatic considerations, the Shah's visit to the U.S. proved costly. On 4 November 1979, sixty-three Americans in the embassy were taken hostage, and another three were seized at the Foreign Ministry building, while others went into hiding. As Cyrus Vance noted, "Thus began an agonizing time for our countrymen and our nation. The Iranian government was disintegrating."[34]

Diplomatic and Military Options

Elected on the strength of his domestic policies and programs, President Carter had a limited foreign policy portfolio in November

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[32] Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 7.
[33] Vance, *Hard Choices*, 368.
[34] Vance, *Hard Choices*, 375.

1979.[35] Moreover, his staff could not agree on policy direction, given their competing views. When combined, the lack of foreign policy experience, divergent views and personalities from his Secretary of State and National Security Advisor, as well as a "hollow force," meant the President's response options to Iran remained limited. Initially, President Carter and Vance were committed to a diplomatic resolution and sought negotiations with the Iranian government, although the President did impose economic sanctions, freezing twelve billion dollars of Iranian assets in the U.S.[36] With negotiations withering, President Carter looked to military options.

Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's National Security Advisor, initiated military planning on the first day of the hostage crisis.[37] Unfortunately, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) did not have an immediate military option for a rescue mission or assault of any kind.[38] The reduction in military personnel and equipment after Vietnam, combined with a shrinking defense budget, was now evident in the limited military response options. Besides the limited options, the entire military was locked into the nuclear threat of the Soviet Union and woefully unprepared for the emergence of radials in Iran. The only unit prepared for such a raid, Beckwith's CAG, while adequately trained, remained untested as it only became operational in 1977.[39] Regardless of the

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[35] President Carter's inaugural address, "had hinted at a new spirit of sacrifice." "In his first major policy address, April 18, 1977, the president honed in on the particular sacrifices he had in mind. Without histrionics or much dramatic appeal at all, Carter called the energy crisis "the moral equivalent of war." Carter encouraged Americans to conserve and vowed new government regulations forcing manufacturers to be more energy efficient." Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 24-25.

[36] Carter, Jimmy. *Keeping Faith Memoirs of a President.* New York: Bantam, 1982. 43.

[37] Beckwith and Knox, *Delta Force*, 212-213.

[38] Brzezinski, Z. K. *Power and Principle,* 1983.

[39] The authority to activate Delta was dated 19 November 1977. "[The activation order] outlined the Unit's mission, its structure, and its high-priority status." Colonel Beckwith was not happy with the command and control mechanisms as his forces would fall under Forces Command (FORSCOM). Beckwith and Knox, *Delta Force*, 130-131

military's readiness, the planning moved forward under the direction of President Carter's National Security Advisor, Dr. Brzezinski.

Planning (Operation Rice Bowl)

Standard procedures called for the establishment of a Joint Task Force (JTF) as well as a mission planning cell to bring the multiple services together.[40] In some special cases, this JTF could even report directly to the Secretary of Defense (SECDEF). While joint doctrine was rudimentary in 1979, command relationships had been codified, albeit loosely, for cases such as Operation Eagle Claw. Regardless of what did exist, the command structure chosen for the mission was ad hoc at best. Instead of following the predetermined contingency plans, the command authority formed a JTF within the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). The Commander of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), General David Jones, selected Major General James B. Vaught as the Commander of JTF 1-79. Vaught formed his team of approximately twenty personnel and retained operational control (OPCON) of all forces across each service, ostensibly under the control of the JCS. General Jones did not use the existing Special Operations Division (SOD) or Contingency Plans (CONPLANS) designed for situations such as those in Iran. Instead, Service Chiefs selected sub-components for the operation. To be sure, the rescue mission was complex, covered vast distances, and was challenged by the politics of securing regional access. In fact, President Carter, in his memoir *Keeping the Faith*, called the mission the "most complex amphibious raid in military history."[41]

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[40] "During this early period, the organizational and planning framework of an existing JCS CONPLAN was not adopted, although some of its provisions were incorporated. These included utilization of intelligence assets and selection of the ground rescue force. Other major areas of endeavor, such as task organization planning, integration of concurrent planning by subordinate units, and determination of support and requirements, were compartmentalized and reliant upon ad hoc requirements." U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report," 15.
[41] Carter, *Keeping the Faith*, 509

Besides the lack of joint doctrine and rejection of the existing contingency plans, limitations placed on the JTF by Carter's national security team hampered planners. Operational Security (OPSEC) concerns led to disjointed information flow, most notably between planners and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Additionally, concerns over OPSEC by the Carter Administration constrained communications with existing SOF personnel in the region. Besides OPSEC, capabilities of military units limited planner's options.[42] Finally, the compartmentalization of the Task Force restricted continuity, communication, and interaction of the staff. Despite the organizational problems, the staff conceived a plan within the guidelines laid out by the JTF Commander for Operation Rice Bowl, the name given to the planning phase of the hostage rescue.[43]

The planners chose a combination of RH-53D helicopters and C-130 aircraft as the best and only mix of assets to overcome the tyranny of distance—the 865 nautical mile flight is the equivalent of traveling one-third of the United States.[44] Beckwith's CAG, as well as Army Rangers, comprised the assault force, whose fluctuation in size leading up to the assault caused friction in the air assets' planning and coordination.[45]

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[42] Following Vietnam, the military was in shambles. Williamson posits it is no surprise "jointness" took a back seat to getting each services house in order.
Williamson, "The Evolution of Joint Warfare."

[43] In a memorandum from the Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to the Joint Task Force Commander (JTF CDR) the JCS requests the name of the execution phase changed to Eagle Claw stating, "Eagle Claw will connote a stronger image in the aftermath than Rice Bowl." Rod Lenahan, *Crippled Eagle: A Historical Perspective of U.S. Special Operations, 1976-1996*, 1st ed (Charleston, S.C. ; Miami, Fla: Narwhal Press, 1998).

[44] Charles Kamps in his Air and Space Power Journal article refutes this assertion. He claims, "RH-53Ds were used because of operational security (they looked "right" on a carrier), in spite of having bad operational readiness rating and no in-flight refueling capability. USAF HH-3E special operations helicopters would have been a better choice, with steps taken to disguise their appearance.
"Operation Eagle Claw: The Iran Hostage Rescue Mission," accessed January 15, 2017, http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/apjinternational/apj-s/2006/3tri06/kampseng.html.

[45] As the plan developed, Beckwith's CAG along with Rangers had to balance the risk of security with the complexity of the mission. The more Beckwith studied the density of

Additionally, the air assets were never under a unified air component making each planning cell autonomous and constrained a coordinated effort. Further adding to the complexity, Navy RH-53D helicopters were to be flown by Marine Corps and Navy pilots based on their shipboard and assault experience.[46] The helicopters comprised the most complex aspect of the operation.[47] Their portion of the mission included an 865-nautical mile Night Vision Goggle (NVG) flight through mountainous terrain without a terrain-following radar, followed by an unrehearsed refueling on the desert floor of Iran, all with only an hour delay built in to accomplish the mission before sunrise.

The final plan—never fully rehearsed—consisted of eight helicopters, six C-130s, and 139 assaulters, in a complicated two-day operation deep into the heart of Tehran.[48] Carrying the CAG as well as a roadblock team and translators, three MC-130s on night one would depart Masirah, Oman and arrive at Desert One first. Next, three EC-130s carrying 18,000 gallons of fuel would follow the MC-130s to the remote desert landing site. Simultaneously, eight RH-53D helicopters on the USS *Nimitz* afloat in the Gulf of Oman would launch for a rendezvous and refuel as well as load of assaulters at Desert One. The plan called for the helicopters to arrive fifteen minutes after the last C-130 was safe on the ground. Upon completion of refueling and loading the assaulters, the helicopters would proceed to a drop off point fifty miles south of Tehran, at a site designated Desert Two, where an advanced ground

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the Embassy and the extraction site it became clear, more assaulters were required. The helicopters weight limitations also factored into Beckwith's calculations. Beckwith and Knox, *Delta Force*. 261-263.

[46] "A USAF captain, Russell "Rotor" Rakip, a CH-53 standardization and evaluation pilot assigned to the 701st TASS at Bergstrom, also joined the task force." Darrel D. Whitcomb, *On a Steel Horse I Ride: A History of the MH-53 Helicopters in War and Peace* (Montgomery Al: Air University Press, 2012). 143.

[47] Beckwith and Knox, *Delta Force*. 301-316.

[48] James H Kyle and John Robert Eidson, *The Guts to Try: The Untold Story of the Iran Hostage Rescue Mission by the on-Scene Desert Commander* (New York: Ballantine Pub. Group, 2002). 202.

party would move the team into position for assault of the embassy and foreign ministry building.[49] The helicopters would proceed to a hideout and await contact with the CAG operators for extraction the following day. Meanwhile, the C-130s would depart to various bases in preparation for the hostage rescue extraction. Day Two operations consisted of ground movement to free the hostages followed by helicopter extraction and a complicated web of MC-130s and Rangers to secure Manzariyeh airfield, an AC-130 Gunship for close air support during extraction, and two C-141s for medical care and hostage departure. The final plan called for all assets to depart Iran except for the helicopters. This complex plan with minimal room for error was finalized and President Carter approved Operation Eagle Claw on 16 April 1980.[50]

Operation Eagle Claw Execution

Execution of a military plan rarely occurs as harmoniously as initially envisioned. Operation Eagle Claw, no exception, launched on 24 April 1980 under the watchful eyes of the JTF Commander and President Carter. As the first C-130 touched down on the desert floor, the imponderables that exist in any complex mission began to wreak havoc on the complex rescue attempt. Intelligence indicated the remote refueling site as abandoned, however, just after the first plane landed, a Mercedes bus appeared to penetrate the perimeter of the landing site, followed shortly by a gasoline tanker truck and another small truck. Forty-five Iranians on the bus were "captured." Plans made to maintain OPSEC of the site evaporated when a Ranger blew up an approaching

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[49] Beckwith recognized the complexity of the assault plan on the embassy "and became more and more convinced that it was vital to Delta's success to insert one of our own people in Teheran. It was necessary to look over all the arrangements and examine critical areas through Delta's eyes." "The plan was to infiltrate these four DOD agents into Teheran a few days before the rescue mission and…they would eyeball all the sites, check on the driving arrangements, and identify possible problem areas." One of the agents was Dick Meadows, code name Esquire. Meadows had also been on the Son Tay Raid in Vietnam. Beckwith and Knox, *Delta Force*, 267-269.
[50] Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 59.

tanker truck with a light anti-tank weapon.[51] The secrecy of the mission, shielded throughout the planning, was blown within minutes of touching down in Iran. Meanwhile, the helicopter crews launched into a dust storm unpredicted by the JTF Air Weather Service Team.[52] Without terrain-following radar, with pilots observing strict radio silence, the eight helicopters quickly became six after one helicopter aborted for a suspected cracked blade and another returned to the ship for faulty flight controls and instrumentation. Before even arriving at Desert One the helicopter force had no room for additional error. The noise of C-130 engines and whirling helicopter blades made communication nearly impossible at the loading site and added suspended dust. The scene quickly descended into chaos.[53]

In addition to the mounting challenges, only six helicopters remained, the minimum required to complete the mission. Col Beckwith, singularly focused on the fleeting timeline, ordered his men to load the remaining helicopters. Just before loading, however, Beckwith learned one of the six helicopters at Desert One was crippled by a hydraulic malfunction and was shutting down. The Task Force was now down to five helicopters. Lt Col Ed Seiffert, the most senior Marine in the flight of helicopters, suggested aborting the mission. The on-scene commander, Col James Kyle, despite knowing little of the helicopter's ability to fly with the malfunction, concurred with the assessment and left the final decision to continue with Col Beckwith. Concerned with the variables facing his now fleeting force, Col Beckwith, knowing his slim margin for error, called off the mission after concurrence and ordered his men to board the C-130s. Soon after, one of the helicopter pilots, disoriented by

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[51] Lenahan, *Crippled Eagle*, 135.
[52] "According to the historical climatological data, the phenomenon was not supposed to occur at this time of year, and, if it did, it was supposed to dissipate by nine to ten P.M. as the night air cooled." Lenahan, *Crippled Eagle*. 138.
[53] James Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers*, Brassey's paperback ed, An AUSA Institute of Land Warfare Book (Washington, [DC]: Brassey's, 1997). 224.

the dust, drifted into a C-130 laden with fuel. Flames accompanied by explosions of grenades, rockets, and ammunition filled the sky, killing eight American servicemen on the once quiet and dusty patch of desert in southern Iran. After the tumultuous ordeal, the remaining C-130s, laden with fuel and all the remaining personnel, were now charged with getting everyone back to Masirah. Dick Meadows and his team in Tehran were now in a tight spot, as many of the classified mission documents were left behind in the remaining helicopters.[54] As with most national calamities, a review board appointed by General Jones, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, convened to determine the causal mechanisms of failure.[55] The JCS-appointed commission, led by Admiral James Holloway, ultimately produced the *Rescue Mission Report,* more commonly known as the Holloway Report.

The Holloway Report

The review panel led by Holloway was charged with conducting a broad examination of the rescue mission. Six senior active and retired military officers sought to examine the planning, organization, coordination, direction, and control of the mission.[56] In the commission's forwarding statement, the authors limited the scope of the investigation to a "professional critique" aimed at addressing Department of Defense activities only, not addressing political or diplomatic measures or means. They remarked on the critical nature of the inquiry and acknowledged the advantage of hindsight. Upon examination of the mission, the review group identified 23 discrete issues worthy of further investigation.[57] Eleven of the 23 issues were considered "major" and coded as having an identifiable influence on the conduct and outcome of the mission. The

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54 Kyle and Eidson, *The Guts to Try*, 342-343.
55 Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 107.
56 U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report." Biographies of the six senior military officers are found in TAB A-F of the rescue mission report
57 U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report," IV.

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eleven major issues led to conclusions and subsequent recommendations by the board. Those issues were: OPSEC, independent review of plans, command and control, readiness evaluation, size of the helicopter force, coordination of joint training, command and control at Desert One, centralized and integrated intelligence (external to the JTF), alternative landing sites, dust phenomenon, and C-130 pathfinders.[58]

The eleven major issues provided the Commission's members with a framework for specific conclusions. The Commission determined a clandestine operation offered the best solution to meet Carter policy objectives. Furthermore, the Commission determined the operation was feasible, and the final decision to execute was justified. The Commission went on to acknowledge the mission was a high-risk operation and determined OPSEC was key to success. As for command and control the conclusions were mixed, stating, "Command and control was excellent at the upper echelons, but became more tenuous and fragile at intermediate levels."[59] The Commission determined that lower level command and control was susceptible to misunderstanding, particularly under pressure. Planning was deemed adequate except for the provisions of backup helicopters and weather contingencies as well as the location of Desert One. Finally, the Commission noted that preparation for the rescue mission was satisfactory but lacked a full-scale rehearsal. Although these conclusions cover a wide spectrum of issues, two fundamental points emerged from their investigation: OPSEC and the ad hoc nature of organization and planning. From these conclusions, the Commission made the following recommendations: establish a Counterterrorist Joint Task Force (CTJTF) with permanently assigned staff and the establishment of a Special Operations Advisory Panel to serve at the Commander in Chief (CINC) or Joint Chiefs of Staff

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[58] U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report," V.
[59] U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report."

(JCS) level to maintain interest in special operations and defense policy issues.[60]

      Not all the observations of the Holloway Commission are relevant to this study's discourse on decision making. This thesis breaks down the observations that are susceptible to decision-making models into four categories, which comprise the case study chapters. Before proceeding, it is imperative to note how much the Holloway Commission's report impacted conclusions on Operation Eagle Claw. The Report's conclusions are often cited as the impetus for the modern SOF organizational structure. Notably, most of the literature discards the Rational Actor conclusions of both the report and the evidence used to draw the report's conclusions. Historian Paul B. Ryan was one of the first to extract conclusions from the Holloway Commission.

      Ryan, the author of *The Iranian Rescue Mission,* notes the Holloway Commission had unfettered access to the military command system. Further, Holloway's group received the "unvarnished truth" from the men directly involved.[61] Both participants and review board members viewed decisions within the mission as resulting from rational choice. James March, in his work *How Decisions Happen,* defines a rational choice as one "that pursues the logic of consequence."[62] He goes on to assert that rational choice theory becomes a general framework for explanations of behavior. Consequently, the Holloway Report is highly susceptible to decision making as rational calculations and rule following. The implications of this assertion point to alternative explanations of *why* the rescue mission failed.

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[60] U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report."

[61] Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission,* 107-125.

[62] James G. March, *A Primer on Decision Making: How Decisions Happen* (New York: Free Press, 2010). 3.

Conclusion

How did Operation Eagle Claw Fail? A historical overview provided necessary context and background of the seminal rescue mission. The chapter concluded with the *Rescue Mission Report,* citing the commission's summary of major issues, conclusions, and recommendations. While sufficient at explaining *how* the mission failed, the conclusions are limited in scope and bound by a rational actor framework. To better understand *why* Operation Eagle Claw failed, Organizational Behavior and Government Politics Models offer an alternative to understand the unobservable relationships between policy makers, generals, and statesmen.[63]

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[63] Kenneth Neal Waltz, ed., *Theory of International Politics*, Reissued (Long Grove, Ill: Waveland Press, 2010). 7-10.

Chapter 2

Decision Making Models: Rational Actor, Organizational Behavior, and Government Politics

Introduction

> *Although the Rational Actor Model has proved useful for many purposes, there is powerful evidence that it must be supplemented by frames of reference that focus on the government machine–the organizations and political actors involved in the policy process.*
>
> Graham Allison &
> Philip Zelikow

Conceptual lenses shape the way we look at evidence and interpret history. Consequently, understanding the genesis of decision making is imperative to fully comprehend the quagmires that face policy makers and governments, such as those confronting President Carter prior to Operation Eagle Claw. Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow's work *Essence of Decision: Exploring the Cuban Missile Crisis* provides three models for understanding the behaviors of government organizations. First, the Rational Actor Model (RAM) attempts to explain events by focusing on the goals and calculations of governments.[1] The preponderance of literature on Operation Eagle Claw centers on these types of assumptions. Second, the Organizational Behavior Model posits government decisions are not made by individuals, but rather through outputs of large organizations functioning according to Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs).[2] Finally, the Government Politics Model explains behavior not as rational choice or organizational output, but, as

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[1]Graham T. Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed (New York: Longman, 1999). 13.

[2] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision.* 143.

the outcomes of competing preferences and bargaining games amongst many players.[3]

This chapter explores Allison and Zelikow's models of decision making. Their concepts have achieved substantial currency in the fields of international relations and decision making. *Essence of Decision* remains the archetype for understanding the nature and character of government decisions, particularly in times of national crisis. Thus, using their models is a sensible place to start an analysis on how decisions were made for Operation Eagle Claw. This chapter explains each model by discussing its basic unit of analysis, the dominant inference patterns, and the salient propositions of each model. This survey provides the framework moving forward for analysis of the Holloway Commission's conclusions unpacked in Chapters Three through Five.

Before proceeding, some terminology requires explanation. As Kenneth N. Waltz claims, models such as those used in this thesis are used in two principal ways. First, models represent theory, and according to Waltz, theories explain laws. Second, models simplify reality usually through omission or reduction in scale.[4] In other words, theories help isolate one realm from another "in order to deal with it intellectually."[5] Consequently, the models discussed in this chapter are necessary to explain the unobservable relationships of decisions made by the Carter administration and defense establishment. As Waltz asserts, the purpose of this endeavor is to envision patterns that otherwise are not visible to the naked eye.[6]

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[3] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision,* 255.

[4] Kenneth Neal Waltz, ed., *Theory of International Politics,* Reissued (Long Grove, Ill: Waveland Press, 2010). 7.

[5] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 8.

[6] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 10.

Rational Actor Model

While insufficient at explaining *why* events take place, the Rational Actor Model (RAM) is a necessary first step in understanding the nature of decision making. The natural inclination to rely on the RAM to explain events occurs for two main reasons. First, the theory "allows the analyst to get inside the agent's calculations and thus have a sense he understands and can explain what was done."[7] Second, much of the RAM is predicated on a cost-benefit analysis, meaning the choice made by the government is value maximizing. These assertions are readily understandable, as they describe how many of us make daily decisions. Despite the familiarity of these concepts to most, the RAM can be misleading.[8]

The basic unit of analysis for the RAM rests on government actions as a choice. This model assumes a unified national actor faces problems using a logical assessment of objectives, alternatives, and consequences that lead to a rational verdict. In turn, this pattern seeks to value-maximize decisions to meet intended objectives. James G. March, in *How Decisions Happen*, calls this the logic of consequence, whereby decisions are made through exploring alternatives, expectations, preferences, and decisions.[9] When faced with a decision March asserts that most people "rationalize it" using this type of logic. This rationale is also how people explain the actions of others.[10] As a result, the RAM is pervasive to most theories of human behavior and used to understand a diverse range of events. The RAM has been used to explain everything from marriage to economics or, in the case of Operation Eagle Claw or the Cuban Missile Crisis, how foreign policy decisions are made.

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[7] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 19.
[8] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 19.
[9] James G. March, *A Primer on Decision Making: How Decisions Happen* (New York: Free Press, 2010). 3-4.
[10] March, *A Primer on Decision Making*, 3.

Prominent International Relations theorists such as Thomas Schelling and Hans Morgenthau, while divergent on style, reach similar conclusions on the nature of the RAM. Each concludes the actor in international relations is the government. They assume governments act in a coordinated, focused manner to make calculated decisions to strategic problems. Finally, each author asserts governments are goals-based and act on reasonable choices to meet the aims of the nation's strategic objectives.[11] As Allison and Zelikow note, these characteristics are the basis of the Rational Actor Model. The characteristics are apparent in the Holloway Commission Report, as well as the memoirs of prominent government officials, such as President Carter, Cyrus Vance, and Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, all involved in Operation Eagle Claw.[12]

Despite its utility, the RAM is insufficient at explaining *why* Operation Eagle Claw failed. The Holloway Report, as well as President Carter's comments and assessments, are littered with value-maximizing language and inferences. For example, the Holloway Commission stated, "the operation was feasible. It probably represented the plan with the best chance of success under the circumstances, and the decision to execute was justified."[13] The rationalization of the operation comes naturally when explaining events, particularly the actions of others. Despite its utility, the RAM does not have the monopoly on truth.

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[11] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 15.

[12] "For various reasons already developed by other writers, [a rational actor model] does not very accurately describe reality. The ability of human beings to process information is more limited than such a comprehensive approach would describe. We are unable to canvass many alternatives, keep them simultaneously in our head, and compare them systematically. We also do not usually clarify our goals; indeed, this is often counterproductive because constructing a political coalition involves persuading people to agree on a specific proposal when they might not agree on a set of goals to be achieved." John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (Boston, MA: Longman, 2011). 78.

[13] U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report," August 1980, V.

Organizational Behavior Model

Whereas the Rational Actor Model views choice as logical and deliberate based on value-maximization, the Organizational Behavior Model is less about deliberate choice and more about "outputs of large organizations functioning per standard operating procedure."[14] Large government organizations are especially susceptible to the Organizational Behavior Model. For example, standard procedures, while efficient, constrain behavior, shape institutional norms, and form the culture.[15] Consider the decision to not use an existing organizational construct for the planning of Operation Eagle Claw. Despite the logic of consequence, sub-organizations still act in accordance with set procedures agnostic to the foreign policy implications of those decisions. In sum, the same procedures that make large organizations capable of accomplishing chosen purposes can also constrain behavior.

The basic unit of analysis of the Organizational Behavior Model assumes that government actions or choice are manifested through organizational output. In other words, the decisions of governments trigger organizational routines and existing capacities. Organizational outputs structure the context and limit the leader's decisions. The organizing concepts for the Organizational Behavior Model are vast. While the RAM assumes a unitary actor, the Organizational Behavior Model assumes action based on fractioned power, organizational missions, operational objectives, culture, and action as an organizational output. Organizations act in ways to minimize uncertainty through sequential actions, standard operating procedures, and central control and coordination.[16] These assumptions provide explanatory power for why decisions made by governments often differ in implementation.

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[14] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 143.
[15] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 143.
[16] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 143.

Whereas the Rational Actor Model views actors as a single entity, the Organizational Behavior Model is more abstract. Simply put, the government is not a single actor, rather, a "vast conglomerate of loosely allied organizations, each with a substantial life of its own."[17] Each organization has its own problems, power struggles, operational objectives, cultures, and performance standards. However, these factors are necessary to perform complex tasks, particularly for large government organizations constrained by budget, time, and resources. In other words, "leaders neglect calculations of administrative feasibility at their own peril."[18]

In subsequent case study chapters four general propositions of the Organizational Behavior Model are used for analysis:

1. Existing organized capabilities influence government choice
2. Organizational priorities shape organizational implementation
3. Implementation reflects previously established routines
4. Leaders neglect calculations of administrative feasibility[19]

As Waltz claims, these theories of organizational behavior will help convey unobservable connections and provide explanatory power as to *why* events unfolded the way they did for Operation Eagle Claw.

First, *existing organized capabilities influence government choice.* This proposition asserts that the existence of an organization, such as Charlie Beckwith's CAG, increases the likelihood that the organization's output will be the choice of leadership and subsequently the government. This decision is conceivable for two reasons. First, the organization already exists, and the cost of the organization, training, and equipment have already been paid. Second, the decision to use the existing

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[17] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision,* 143.
[18] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision,* 179.
[19] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision,* 176-182.

organization is more feasible because the idea is not nested in a hypothetical, but through the physical existence of the organization. Consequently, the existence of the organization allows the leader to seek estimates and information. The unit sees itself as advocating a perspective based on their unique characteristics and qualities. In fact, "they more often see their reason for being as advocating a point of view."[20] These organizations perceive other units as also playing their part to decision makers.

Second, *Organizational priorities shape organizational implementation.* In other words, organizations emphasize "the objectives most congruent to their special capacities and to the hierarchies of beliefs in the organization's culture."[21] In sum, organizations emphasize what they are good at. Charlie Beckwith's CAG emphasized their ability to take down the embassy, the MC-130s crews emphasized their ability to penetrate Iranian airspace and carry the assaulters to the Desert One landing strip, and so on.

Third, *Implementation reflects previously established routines.* This proposition proclaims that standard procedures and routines do not reflect the ability to adapt to "the issue."[22] The actions of organizations are thus the result of Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) and not the direction of the government leaders. In fact, SOPs are comprised of routines that allow "large numbers of ordinary individuals to deal with numerous instances."[23] On the one hand, these routines are the key to success for large government organizations because of the predictable outcomes that baseline adequate performance. On the other hand, when critical situations arise that do not fit "standard" the results are "often handled sluggishly or inappropriately."[24]

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[20] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 177.
[21] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 177.
[22] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 178.
[23] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 178.
[24] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 178.

Finally, *Leaders neglect calculations of administrative feasibility.* As Allison and Zelikow posit, a gulf exists between what government leaders choose and what organizations implement. This proposition is comprised of seven factors. First, "organizations are blunt instruments"[25] that often use too much force to achieve goals. Second, any project that asks an organization to depart from its designed purpose is rarely accomplished as leaders envision. Third, any project that requires coordination among many groups is rarely executed as designed. Fourth, by bringing together multiple groups, each organization brings its own routines and standard operating procedures, "producing unforeseen and possibly dangerous consequence[s]."[26] Fifth, if an assigned task does not meet the intended goals of the organization, resistance can be expected. Sixth, government leaders should expect each organization to "do its part" but only within the framework of what it knows how to do. Finally, government leaders can expect distorted, incomplete data from each organization concerning their part in solving the problem.[27] The difficulty adhering to all seven of these factors increases the likelihood that organizations will modify, sometimes profoundly, the original intent of a government leader.

Government Politics Model

The Government Politics Model assumes actions result from the bargaining games that take place among players in the administration and government establishment. For this model, government action is the political resultant. In other words, "outcomes are formed, and deformed, by the interaction of competing preferences."[28] Unlike the Rational Actor Model, this model identifies no single actor, rather, many actors as

[25] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision,* 179.
[26] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision,* 179.
[27] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision,* 179-180.
[28] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision,* 255.

players. Each player does not focus on a single decision or issue. Instead, they focus on a variety of problems ranging from organizational to personal objectives. Because the government is set up for individuals to share power, multiple competing objectives arise and create a milieu of friction between individuals and organizations.

Decisions and actions within the Government Politics Model are intra-national political resultants. In other words, what happens is not a specific solution set, rather, a result of compromises, confusion, and conflict of government officials with their own influence, interests, and objectives.[29] Consider the different objectives of President Carter and Cyrus Vance or the relationships among the Service Chiefs. Both examples show how each organization or individual exerts unique influences, adds confusion and ultimately compromises to reach decisions. Four interrelated questions help organize this model:

1. Who plays?
2. What factors shape players' perceptions, preferences, and stance on the issue?
3. What determines each player's impact on results?
4. How does the game combine players' stands, influence, and moves to yield governmental decisions and actions?[30]

Who plays? Unlike the Rational Actor Model or Organizational Behavior Model, the government actor is neither a single agent nor comprised of organizations. In the Government Politics Model, the basic unit of analysis is made up of many individual players. Consequently, "groups of players constitute the agent for particular government decisions and actions. Players are individuals in jobs."[31] For example, the president and secretaries of Defense and State occupy positions that make them players in the national security game. Within the game, players have varying levels of influence and responsibility. The modern

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[29] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 295-296.
[30] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 296.
[31] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 296.

Secretary of State, for example, plays different roles to different audiences.

What factors shape players' perceptions, preferences, and stance on the issue? Allison and Zelikow offer four answers to this question. First, parochial priorities and perceptions will impact decisions. For instance, representatives of an organization will be sensitive to that group's objectives, which leads to their goals and objectives. But goals and objectives are not just limited to organizations, such as Cyrus Vance's stance on the rescue mission. Vance's disagreement with President Carter represents overlapping interests which "constitute the stakes for which games are played."[32] The final factor that shapes a stance on an issue is deadlines. Ultimately, deadlines force "busy players" to take a stance. Consider President Carter's reelection cycle "deadline" looming over the decisions of the Defense establishment through Eagle Claw's planning.

What determines each player's impact on results? Three elements determine a player's impact on decision making. Bargaining power and willingness to use it constitute the first two elements. The third element is the perception of the first two. In other words, how persuasive are government players at leveraging their position, and how does that manifest to successful outcomes? Like any other relationship, government players must wield power wisely to manage "power capital."[33]

How does the game combine players' stands, influence, and moves to yield governmental decisions and actions? Allison and Zelikow suggest government action is neither random nor "ad hoc." Instead, government actions are connected to the players whose power and position link them to action channels, which is "a regularized means of taking governmental action on a specific kind of issue."[34] In other words, action channels

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[32] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 299.
[33] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 300.
[34] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 300.

bring structure to the game by predetermining the major players. However, an asymmetry occurs within this structure based on whose channel takes action. For example, when considering military intervention, the President, in concert with secretaries and ambassadors determines strategic objectives but then must rely on military planners to implement the ways and means. Within this organizational construct Combatant Commanders must then choice specific capabilities and ultimately an action is attached to a unit. This entire process is governed by rules, such as the Constitution, Executive Orders, and judicial interpretations. In sum, this process makes all action a political result. As Allison and Zelikow assert, "Government decisions are made, and government actions are taken, neither as the simple choice of a unified group, nor as a formal summary of leaders preferences. Rather, the context of shared power but separate judgements about important choices means that politics is the mechanism of choice. Each player pulls and hauls with the power at his discretion for outcomes that will advance his or her conception of national, organizational, group, and personal interests."[35]

Conclusion

Understanding *why* decisions were made by the Carter Administration and defense establishment for Operation Eagle Claw requires a framework to grasp the components not obvious upon first appraisal. Allison and Zelikow's models provide that framework and have proven valid in the field of decision making. More importantly, these models supplement the existing assumptions on the mechanisms of failure for Operation Eagle Claw. Case studies of the major Holloway Commission observations follow, and use these models to show new

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[35] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 302.

patterns and observations and offer new explanations on *why* the rescue mission failed.

Chapter 3

Operational Security (OPSEC)

Introduction

Many things, which in the opinion of the review group could have been done to enhance mission success, were not done because of strict OPSEC considerations. The review group considers that most of these alternatives could have been incorporated without an adverse OPSEC impact had there been a more precise OPSEC plan. A carefully structured Joint Task Force (JTF) organization would have inherently provided an OPSEC environment within which a selective process could have allowed a wider initial disclosure policy—still a very stringent need-to-know policy—but based upon selective disclosure rather than minimum disclosure.

Rescue Mission Report
August 1980

JTF Rationale. The underlying reasons for such heavy emphasis on OPSEC were well understood throughout the JTF. Surprise was the <u>sine qua non</u> for mission success, and complete security was essential to attain surprise.

Rescue Mission Report
August 1980

Why Excessive OPSEC?

The Holloway Commission members struggled over their conclusions on OPSEC, admitting it was "the group's most difficult judgement."[1] The members determined that "slightly greater selectivity and flexibility in the OPSEC arena, particularly within the JTF, could have been beneficial in operational terms without necessarily sacrificing security."[2] Admiral Holloway admitted the difficulties the Commission members faced in determining the origins of excessive OPSEC.[3] After

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[1] U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report," August 1980. 13.
[2] U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report," 13.
[3] U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report."
Statement of Admiral J.L. Holloway, III, USN, August 1980.

further scrutiny, it would have been problematic for the Commission members to place blame at the political level, considering the group's charge to conduct a military investigation exclusively. The Government Politics Model applied in the next chapter will make the political origins of opaque command and control clearer, pointing to government players as the causal mechanism. A central question remains: *why* did government and military leaders, and subsequently the Holloway Commission members, rationalize the need for disproportionate OPSEC, and was it a causal mechanism of failure for Operation Eagle Claw? The Organizational Behavior Model will help answer these questions in this chapter.

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An Alternative Perspective:

The Organizational Behavior Model

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Whereas the Rational Actor Model views choice as logical and deliberate based on value-maximization, the Organizational Behavior Model (OBM) is less about choice and more about the outputs of large organizations.[4] The outputs of large organizations act in accordance with set procedures, which are often agnostic to the foreign policy implications of those choices. Human choices, which make group actions and tasks possible, also constrain behavior. This model will help convey the unobservable connections made by government players regarding OPSEC and provide explanatory power for why events unfolded the way they did for Operation Eagle Claw. Four general propositions of Allison and Zelikow's OBM will guide further inquiry.

"We were not chartered to produce a white paper examining the Iranian hostage crisis at the national level. Our focus was essentially within the Department of Defense and primarily on military issues. We reviewed all documents relating to the planning and execution of the mission, interviewed participants, examined types of equipment used, and observed exercises typical of the kinds of operations conducted."

[4] Graham T. Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis,* 2nd ed (New York: Longman, 1999). 143.

Existing organized capabilities influence government choice.[5] The
desires and perceptions of government leaders to maintain secrecy were
a direct reflection of existing military capabilities. As previously
discussed, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) in 1979 was ill-
equipped for a hostage rescue and not organized to maintain the
appropriate OPSEC. While disparate special operations forces (SOF)
capabilities existed, such as Beckwith's CAG, and Air Force SOF
squadrons, there was no unifying command. This lack of unifying
command led to the "ad hoc" nature of the organization for Operation
Eagle Claw and heightened the collective concern over secrecy. While
DoD forces may not have been optimally organized for such a mission,
alternatives did exist for government decision makers. For example,
Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Contingency Plans (CONPLANS) were available
as part of the Crisis Action System (CAS).[6] The CAS existed to provide
guidance and planning during times of national emergencies, such as
time sensitive hostage rescues. Further, "the group would have
implemented existing JCS procedures intended to provide the Joint
Chiefs of Staff, Services, commanders of unified and specified
commands, and other agencies information with which to develop
recommendations to the National Command Authority (NCA) pertaining
to military courses of action."[7] Despite these predetermined
organizational constructs the JTF commander, General James Vaught,
guided by the political imperatives of secrecy, chose an "ad hoc"
arrangement. The commander of the JTF (COMJTF) rationalized:
"OPSEC was the overriding consideration in every aspect of mission
planning, training, deployment, and execution because of the absolute
requirement to reach the Embassy compound undetected. OPSEC,

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[5] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 176-182.
[6] U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report," 17.
[7] U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report," 17.

coupled with dynamic planning process and development of special mission capabilities, drove COMJTF to the techniques adopted for this organization, planning, and preparation."[8] As a result of the specified constraints by government players during the planning process, value-maximizing choices led the COMJTF to select to the organizational structure. The Holloway Commission members concurred, stating the dynamic planning process and OPSEC led to the "ad hoc" organization. The question, however, still remains: Why did the COMJTF not choose the existing organizations using the Crisis Action System?

After further examination, it is apparent the desires of excessive OPSEC driven by national security players influenced the COMJTF not to use existing organizational structures. While it is unknown if the JCS CONPLANS would have produced a different outcome, there are still lessons to be learned. Had the existing structure been utilized, behaviors of the organization may have been more predictable. Existing organizations tend to provide estimates based on known capabilities and limits.[9] As such, the organization can advocate for options based on existing capabilities, as oppose to hypotheticals. Beyond the predictive capability, existing organizations can also perceive how other organizations will play into the larger goals of the decision maker.[10] In hindsight, the decision not to use the existing JTF structure meant the "ad-hoc" organization would lose out on all the imperatives existing organizations provide and thus leave the "ad-hoc" group to rely on hypotheticals.

Organizational priorities shape organizational implementation. The existing organization provided by the JCS Crisis Action System is an intriguing case study of how organizational priorities shape implementation. The decision not to use the existing structure is a

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[8] U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report," 17.
[9] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 177.
[10] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 177.

debated misstep in the planning and coordination of the mission. While one might posit the existing structure as a tool that would have helped avoid excessive OPSEC, others, such as Colonel James Kyle, refute the assertion the Crisis Action System offered organizational strengths. The OBM however, illuminates a different narrative. For an organization to shape implementation, however, it requires the group to emphasize "the objectives most congruent to their special capacities."[11] The existing JCS system lacked agency. The entire system was more of a coordinating effort, bringing together organizations, services, and commanders.[12] The Crisis Action System was a vehicle for coordination, as opposed to an organization capable of emphasizing culture or institutional imperatives. After further review, the COMJTF's rationale for choosing an "ad-hoc" organizational structure was not only driven by OPSEC but also through the lack of agency in the existing JCS structures.

The Holloway Commission members rationalized the use of the existing structure would have provided the appropriate OPSEC. They stated, "the group's alternative for organization, command, and control would have used the stable, existing framework of the relevant JCS CONPLAN to organize, plan, train, and execute the mission, as well as to provide the mandatory OPSEC."[13] The OBM, however, suggests an alternate explanation. While the existing structure provided military plans prepared by unified commanders and other options for the National Command Authority, plans do not represent an organization. The central premise of organizational priorities relies on an organization's culture and beliefs to champion its imperatives. Upon further review, the OBM refutes the conclusions of the Holloway Commission. In particular, an OBM assessment suggests the existing JCS CONPLANS would have

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[11] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 177.
[12] James H Kyle and John Robert Eidson, *The Guts to Try: The Untold Story of the Iran Hostage Rescue Mission by the on-Scene Desert Commander* (New York: Ballantine Pub. Group, 2002).
[13] U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report," 17.

done little to change the perceptions of OPSEC. First, the "top-down" OPSEC concerns, pushed by powerful action channels, were represented by the most powerful players in the national security game. Second, the existing CONPLANS, while administratively feasible, lacked a unifying agent to champion to refute other players in the push and pull of government decisions.

Implementation reflects previously established routines. On one hand, previously established routines, often referred to as standard operating procedures (SOPs), allow large organizations to accomplish otherwise insurmountable tasks. On the other hand, SOPs lead to ambiguity when situations arise that fall outside of what is expected. Allison and Zelikow point out that when non-standard situations arise, the results are "often handled sluggishly or inappropriately."[14] For Operation Eagle Claw, neither of these assertions are accurate. First, no overarching organization in the sense Allison and Zelikow argue existed to manage and coordinate the planning for Operation Eagle Claw. Consequently, no operating procedures existed to ensure OPSEC. Second, given no overarching organization existed, the "ad-hoc" Task Force compensated for lack of procedures by compartmentalizing their individual efforts to a fault.

Excessive OPSEC was not only limited to the planning cell. The obsession with compartmentalization dissuaded any independent review of the plans. In fact, members of the existing teams only reviewed their individual plans, limiting an objective assessment of them holistically. By the time the mission finally launched, OPSEC restrictions were manifest all the way down to the tactical level where key elements of the operation never worked together until the night of the mission.

Leaders neglect calculations of administrative feasibility. To translate this feature of the OBM into more accessible terms, a gulf

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[14] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 178.

exists between what government leaders choose and what organizations implement. While government players such as President Carter and Dr. Brzezinski pursued secrecy, it is unlikely they desired secrecy at the expense of mission accomplishment. OPSEC considerations aside, any project that requires coordination among many groups is rarely executed as designed. As John Kingdon notes in his book, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, "Presidents find they cannot order that something be done and expect it to be done."[15] Consequently, when excessive compartmentalization is introduced, negative outcomes can be expected. Besides OPSEC, government leaders often are unaware that each group participating in an event such as Operation Eagle Claw bring their own routines, and SOPs, in the process. This combination of routines and procedures often leads to unforeseen and, in the case of the rescue attempt, dangerous consequences.[16]

Tying it all Together

While illuminating several aspects of OPSEC during Operation Eagle Claw, the Organizational Behavior Model is insufficient in providing new insights on *why* it was so excessive. The model does, however, provide explanatory and predictive power for organizational imperatives in decision-making in times of crisis. The next chapter on opaque C2 will articulate how government politics play a significant role in the actions and decisions of military officers charged with executing operations and provide insights for general officers on the nature of government decisions. This chapter, however, offers insights and cautions for policy makers. Regardless of organizational imperatives, large bureaucracies are subject to the difficulties associated with coordination and execution of complex tasks. OPSEC would have been

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[15] John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (Boston, MA: Longman, 2011). 53.
[16] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 179.

less a factor had an overarching organization existed and replaced, or at least had visibility into and coordinated the efforts of, the disparate units and planning cells. A single overarching organization, however, would still fall prey to standard operating procedures, organizational priorities, and culture. After further scrutiny, the Organizational Behavior Model provides a degree of explanatory power but is insufficient in explaining fully *why* OPSEC was so excessive.

Conclusion

Excessive OPSEC cannot be explained by any single analytic model. All three of Allison and Zelikow's decision-making models, however, point to causal mechanisms. The Rational Actor Model, for example, posits secrecy as the highest priority to increase mission success. The Government Politics Model expands on this point by highlighting the importance of the players influencing the need for OPSEC. The Organizational Behavior Model, in contrast, contradicts both assertions as well as the conclusions reached during the Holloway Commission investigation. The Commission rationalized that the existing JCS/SOD task organization could have reduced the impact of excessive OPSEC. While this may have helped, the Organizational Behavior Model points to different outcomes, particularly in government decision making. All government organizations, particularly those operating under standard procedures, are susceptible to missteps, typified by excessive compartmentalization by JTF members.

Opaque Command and control, the subject of the next chapter, was the result of excessive OPSEC. The previous case study examined decision making using the Organizational Behavior Model. The next case study focuses on Opaque Command and Control using the Government Politics Model. The conclusions place the causal mechanism of failure on the players in the natinal security game.

Chapter 4

Opaque Command and Control

Introduction

*By not utilizing an existing Joint Task Force (JTF)
organization, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had to start, literally,
from the beginning to establish a JTF, find a commander,
create an organization, provide a staff, develop a plan, select
the units, and train the forces before attaining even the most
rudimentary mission readiness.*

Rescue Mission Report
August 1980

*An existing JTF organization, even with a small staff and
only cadre units assigned, would have provided an
organizational framework of professional expertise around
which a larger tailored force organization could quickly
coalesce.*

Rescue Mission Report
August 1980

The conclusions of the Holloway Commission on the Command
and Control (C2) of Operation Eagle Claw are based upon the Rational
Actor Model (RAM). Three parts of the model are evident in the Rescue
Mission Report's findings on the organization of the JTF. First, the
Report's authors rationalize that not using the existing Task Force
complicated C2 unnecessarily. This rationalization is fair considering
existing headquarters elements were already task organized for such an
event.[17] Second, the authors assess the decision to form an "ad-hoc"
organization was a logic of consequence formed out of the concern for
operational security (OPSEC) by President Carter and his National

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[17] Col James Kyle refutes these assertions by the Holloway Commission stating that
while a JCS contingency Plan existed, "it was not useful in the context of our
organization and planning problems. Other than providing a list of forces based on
escalating levels of conflict it had little value for our purposes."
James H Kyle and John Robert Eidson, *The Guts to Try: The Untold Story of the Iran
Hostage Rescue Mission by the on-Scene Desert Commander* (New York: Ballantine Pub.
Group, 2002). 40.

Security director, Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski. Finally, due to the depleted state of the American military in 1979,[18] as well as the bipolar nature of U.S. and Soviet relations, no overarching organization to command and control joint special operations existed.[19] Consequently, the members of the Holloway Commission deduced that no alternatives existed to the planners of the operation. The deduction of a lack of alternatives is a hallmark of the Rational Actor Model.[20]

This chapter reassesses the Holloway Commission's conclusions on C2 using the Government Politics Model. This model provides new insights into the character of decision making within the Carter Administration and Defense establishment. Upon further examination, the initial decisions regarding OPSEC made by President Carter and Dr. Brzezinski informed Major General James B. Vaught's verdict and direction of the operation's C2. In other words, General Vaught's decisions were the political result of two powerful players in the national security game. The Carter Administration's perceptions of the military's ability to maintain secrecy placed vast pressures on general officers to organize accordingly. This chapter proceeds by explaining the context that led to opaque C2 followed by an alternative explanation using the Government Politics Model.

Why Opaque Command and Control?

From the outset, the planning for Operation Eagle Claw was mired in the push and pull of government politics. Entrenched in the bipolar

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[18] Andrew Feickert and Stephen Daggett, "A Historical Perspective on 'Hollow Forces'." *Congressional Research Service* accessed January 31, 2017, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R42334.pdf.

[19] A Joint Chiefs of Staff-Special Operations Division did exist but was not utilized due to OPSEC concerns. Since no office had responsibility for hostage rescues or counter terrorism individuals were "recruited" into the JCS/SOD division for the duration of the planning. Paul B. Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission: Why It Failed* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1985) 114-116.

[20] James G. March, *A Primer on Decision Making: How Decisions Happen* (New York: Free Press, 2010). 2.

policies of the Cold War,[21] the crisis in Iran weakened U.S. influence in the region with the Soviet Union.[22] The crisis, and American distraction geopolitically during it, provided a strategic window of opportunity for the Soviets to invade Afghanistan. Beyond the foreign policy implications, domestically the American public was losing confidence in President Carter each day the crisis went unresolved, a crucial point further intensified by his upcoming re-election bid.[23] Needing a boost both internationally and domestically, President Carter asked his National Security Council Director, Dr. Brzezinski, to oversee a military option. Just one day after the crisis began, the Director requested the Commander of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), General David C. Jones, to begin planning for military possibilities.[24] Before extensive planning commenced, however, Brzezinski placed constraints on military planners. Most of the constraints concerned the safety of the hostages as well as minimizing Iranian casualties, but one constraint specifically is culpable in the chain of missteps: the maintenance of absolute secrecy in all phases of the planning process.[25]

An Alternative Perspective:

Government Politics Model

The members of the Holloway Commission concluded the "ad hoc" nature of the organization comprised "most of the major issues"

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[21] Cyrus Vance and Zbigniew Brzezinski both supported "a tough-minded approach to the Soviet Union, though one tempered by the need to reduce Cold War tensions." While they both supported the approach to the Soviet Union they diverged in temperament, "Brzezinski, was a hard-charger; Vance was a cautious player in world affairs." David R Farber, *Taken Hostage: The Iran Hostage Crisis and America's First Encounter with Radical Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). 45-46.

[22] Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 186.

[23] "During the first half of the year [1980], Carter declined to leave Washington and campaign for re-election, saying that doing so would detract from his efforts to obtain the hostages' release." Congressional Quarterly, inc, ed., *President Carter, 1980*, A Contemporary Affairs Report (Washington, D.C: Congressional Quarterly Inc, 1981).

[24] Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 12-13.

[25] Brzezinski later acknowledged he was "haunted" by the fear of exposure of the plan. Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission,* 12-13.

associated with mission failure.[26] The members of the Commission go on to suggest that by using an existing organizational structure the missteps may have been avoided.[27] On the one hand, this suggestion by the Commission is rationally based on the logic of consequence.[28] On the other hand, the conclusion discounts the political pressures, individual agendas, different objectives, and competing preferences of the Carter Administration.[29] When considered through the lens of the Government Politics Model, new insights reveal that the causal mechanisms of mission failure went beyond military organizational shortfalls and fall more accurately on the political players. Each of the four questions defining the Government Politics Model will guide further enquiry.

Who plays? The international attention of the hostage crisis cannot be understated.[30] This is particularly acute considering Carter's waning popularity. By 1979 oil prices were again on the rise and the President's approval rating was analogous to Richard Nixon's at the time of his resignation before he could be impeached.[31] Following the crisis in Iran, President Carter and his advisors consequently were "hands-on" concerning military options. The Government Politics Model defines the President and his advisors as "groups of players [who] constitute the agent for particular government decisions and actions. Players are individuals in jobs."[32] What is most important to the players in the

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26 U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report," 60.
27"At a minimum, COMJTF would have had a running start and could have devoted more hours to plans, operations, and tactics rather than to administration and logistics." U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report," August, 1980, 60.
28 March, *A Primer on Decision Making*.
29 Graham T. Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed (New York: Longman, 1999). 295-296
30 Nightly specials of the crisis aired on ABC News, hosted by Ted Koppel. The news program aired multiple interviews, including with Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers, while others featured interviews with members of the hostages' families.
Farber, David R. *Taken Hostage: The Iran Hostage Crisis and America's First Encounter with Radical Islam*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2006. 7.
31 "A mid-summer poll showed only 25 percent of Americans willing to give their President a rating of good or excellent." Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 31.
32 Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 296.

national security game is their varying levels of influence and responsibility. The result, in this case, was President Carter's influence on the need for secrecy,[33] manifested through his surrogate Dr. Brzezinski, who led the operational planning and coordination through select military officers.

The level of influence Dr. Brzezinski asserted was made evident to the other players from the start.[34] Dr. Brzezinski convened secret meetings in his office with general officers two to three times a week.[35] The location of the meetings alone indicates his player status.[36] Haunted by massive government information leakage during the Vietnam War and the military's propensity to duplicate documents, Brzezinski made clear his desire for absolute secrecy surrounding planning for the rescue. Influenced by the President's agenda, as well as his own, Brzezinski unknowingly laid the foundation for opaque C2 through his emphasis on secrecy. As a result, the military commanders were left with no choice but to compartmentalize the planning of one of the most audacious hostage rescues ever attempted.[37, 38]

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[33] "The White House priority on maintaining secrecy characterized the operation from the start." Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 12.

[34] "Who shows up for or is invited to a given critical meeting, and their degree of activity at the meeting, for instance, turn out to make a tremendous difference." Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (Boston, MA: Longman, 2011). 84.

[35] "The members included Defense Secretary Harold Brown; Admiral Stansfield Turner, director of the CIA; and probably at times, General David Jones; chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and Lieutenant General John S Pustay, his assistant."
 Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 12.

[36] Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 12-16.

[37] "The complexities of planning a rescue, the scale of which had never before undertaken, were huge. Tactically conducting a rescue in a twenty-seven acre compound consisting of more than sixteen building holding upwards of 67 possible hostages at five different locations guarded by a force numbering more than 150, which in turn was supported by bands of armed zealot irregulars, was daunting. Compounding the problem was the fact that the rescue objective was located in a congested urban center more than 1,600 miles from the nearest American military base." Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary*, 1st ed (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).

[38] Rod Lenahan, *Crippled Eagle: A Historical Perspective of U.S. Special Operations, 1976-1996,* 1st ed (Charleston, S.C. ; Miami, Fla: Narwhal Press, 1998).

What factors shape players' perceptions, preferences, and stance on the issue?[39] Allison and Zelikow assert that parochial priorities and perceptions impact decisions. They go on to highlight that players, in the national security game, also inflict deadlines. When these elements are combined, the impact on decision makers is hard to ignore. Consider Dr. Brzezinski's position as the National Security Advisor. On the one hand, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown oversaw all matters pertaining to the military. On the other hand, Dr. Brzezinski was the spokesman for the President.[40] As Ryan posits, "Brzezinski wielded a power that the Pentagon must have understood."[41] Besides his parochial priorities, Dr. Brzezinski imposed deadlines, albeit unofficial ones. Charlie Beckwith, the assault force commander, concurs with this point, saying Brzezinski instilled a sense of urgency to the planners.[42,43]

What determines each player's impact on results?[44] The answer to this question rests on how persuasive government players are at leveraging their position. Dr. Brzezinski was quite persuasive based on his proximity to President Carter. Ostensibly responsible for Carter's foreign policy agenda, Brzezinski was hawkish on how the U.S. needed to deal with its perceived diminishing influence in the competition between the superpowers.[45] He made this point clear in March of 1980 during a Special Coordinating Committee meeting, where he asserted the U.S. was losing momentum. He concluded the meeting with the following

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[39] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 299-300.

[40] "No other single actor in the political system has quite the capability of the president to set agendas in given policy areas for all who deal with those policies." John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies,* 23.

[41] Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission,* 14.

[42] *Ryan, The Iranian Rescue Mission,* 14.

[43] General Vaught's Staff was also culpable in passing deadlines, to include creating a sense of urgency for mission execution based on weather and illumination considerations. The Staff claimed the mission either launch in April, or wait until November. Lenahan, *Crippled Eagle.*

[44] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision.* 299-300.

[45] "In most respects, Brzezinski was as hardheaded a realist as Henry Kissinger. He had even less trust and even more disgust for the leading communist powers in the world." Farber, *Taken Hostage,* 43.

observation: "We have essentially run out of peaceful steps we can take to put pressure on the Iranians, are we prepared for more significant military actions?"[46] Dr. Brzezinski's propensity for a military response combined with his desires for secrecy directly impacted the compartmentalization of the operation. Consequently, C2 was mired in the push and pull of government players' perceptions of the military's ability to keep the operation a secret from the outset. With no choice but to comply, the generals rationalized the importance of secrecy just as much as Dr. Brzezinski. Consequently, the generals bought into the concept of secrecy and clandestine operations at the expense of appropriate organizational concepts. The direct outcome of these decisions, perceptions, and assumptions led to opaque C2.

How does the game combine players' stands, influence, and moves to yield governmental decision and actions?[47] Government action is neither random nor "ad hoc," but is produced through action channels.[48] Government actions are therefore linked to the player whose power connects them to the most persuasive action channel. There is no doubt that President Carter represented the most powerful action channel, but he was not involved in the daily spin of planning unlike his National Security Advisor. Dr. Brzezinski's desire to maintain secrecy, as well as pushing military options over the diplomatic courses of action desired by Cyrus Vance, shaped decisions of the military planners. By representing the most powerful action channel, General Vaught was left no choice but to comply with Brzezinski's demands and desires. While much of the literature blames opaque C2 on tactical missteps, the root cause was actually strategic perceptions concerning OPSEC by key national security players.

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[46] Farber, *Taken Hostage*, 170.
[47] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 299-300.
[48] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 300.

Tying it all Together

The widely-accepted narrative theme associated with Operation Eagle Claw's opaque C2 focuses on excessive OPSEC as the causal mechanism of failure. While not entirely incorrect, this explanation misses the foundational points of *why* OPSEC was an influence in the first place. The Government Politics Model answers this question. This chapter highlights how much individual positions, and the power that comes with them, influences decision making in large bureaucracies. Soon after the mission, while briefing the House Committee, Dr. Brzezinski solidified his stance on C2 stating "I organized an austere but typical Joint Staff organization containing J1 personnel, J2, J3, J4, J5, J6, etc. Most of this staff were already members of a Joint Staff element known as SOD Special Operations Division."[49] This statement is the only line he spends on C2 in his testimony as he quickly transitioned to "maintaining total operational security."[50] Here, Brzezinski rationalized the need for OPSEC at the expense of a more appropriate C2 structure.

Conclusion

After further scrutiny, the decision to form an "ad hoc" Task Force for the planning and execution of Operation Eagle Claw goes beyond rational choice of the Rational Actor Model. The rationalization of outcomes and logic of consequence led President Carter and Dr. Brzezinski, the two most powerful players in national security, to choose OPSEC over the most suitable organizational structure. While not clear at the time, it was their decisions and government imperatives that led to opaque C2. To date, much of the literature places blame for the opaque C2 on the tactical element leaders at the Desert One. While this may have been the outcome, the reason *why* it occurred falls on the players in

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[49] Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Briefing Outline for House Committee, 6 May 1980" (U.S. Government, May 6, 1980).
[50] Brzezinski, "Briefing Outline for House Committee."

Washington—not those struggling with a range of unforeseen factors in the desert of southern Iran.

Chapter 5

Planning & Lack of Full-Scale Rehearsal

Introduction

Preparation for the mission was adequate except for the lack of comprehensive, full-scale training.

Rescue Mission Report
August 1980

OPSEC considerations mitigated against such a rehearsal and, while the review group recognized the inherent risk in bringing all of the forces together in the western US training site, the possible security disadvantages of such a rehearsal seem to be outweighed by the advantages to be gained:

Rescue Mission Report
August 1980

Operation Eagle Claw faced two enemies, one external and the other internal. The external was the Iranian radicals holding Americans hostage in Tehran. The internal "enemy" was excessive concern over OPSEC by government leaders. The final case study of this thesis, exploring planning and rehearsal, cannot escape the shadow of excessive security concerns. While disproportionate OPSEC is best understood through the Government Politics Model, new insights are possible on planning and rehearsal through discussing the intersection of the Government Politics Model and the Organizational Behavior Model. Countless authors, to include the Holloway Commission members, attribute the poor planning and lack of full-scale rehearsal to OPSEC concerns.[1] While not incorrect, the causal mechanisms that explain why this occurred go beyond the rationalization of operational secrecy. Two major components of planning and rehearsal require further

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[1] Paul B. Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission: Why It Failed* (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 1985).

investigation. First, *why* did the JCS not press for an independent review of the plans? Second, was the lack of a full-scale rehearsal just another political result flowing from the need for excessive OPSEC, or are organizational imperatives also a factor—and if so, to what degree?

Before proceeding, it is important to explain the different approach used in this chapter. The previous case studies utilized a single model for analysis for two reasons. First, each case was more inclined towards one model or the either based on where decisions were made. Second, available primary source data made one model more applicable over another. The last case study, the culmination of government decisions, is best explored at the intersection of the two models. Consequently, poor planning and lack of full-scale rehearsal will be examined through both the Organizational Behavior Model and the Government Politics Model. Rational Actor Model conclusions provide a departure point for this inquiry.

Why Poor Planning & No Full-Scale Rehearsal?

Author Paul B. Ryan attributes problems with planning for Operation Eagle Claw to the Joint Chiefs.[2] He asserts, "in the all-too-frenetic atmosphere of the Pentagon, the Chiefs may have relied too much on Vaught's staff briefing to assure themselves that planning for the raid was progressing satisfactorily."[3] In the course of their investigation, Holloway Commission members were disturbed by the infrequent briefings the Chiefs received, noting they had only "a few briefings on the plan."[4] If government actions are choices intended to maximize value, the Chiefs were doing just that through their small number of updates on the operation. General Vaught was chosen both for his proximity in the Pentagon but more so for his special operations acumen. As Ryan posits, "General Vaught wore two stars; his record in

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[2] Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission,* 28.
[3] Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission,* 28.
[4] Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission,* 28.

combat was unmatched; and he had been recommended for command of the task force by the army chief of staff himself."[5] Both the Chiefs, who ostensibly selected him, and Vaught himself, were in an iterative self-reinforcing relationship, a behavioral theory focusing on "the strong tendency for people to see what they expect to see and to assimilate incoming information to pre-existing images."[6] In other words, the JCS trusted his inputs, as seen through their lack of examination or outside judgment and Vaught, not being questioned, pressed forward with his team's plans.[7]

Rod Lenahan, author of *Crippled Eagle* and a participant in Operation Eagle Claw, offers another perspective of the mission's planning. He provides a detailed account of both planning under Joint Task Force (JTF) Rice Bowl and the execution of Operation Eagle Claw. Lenahan concurs with other authors on the reason behind the selection of Vaught, stating, "in addition to General Vaught's experience as an Army Division and JTF Commander, he had an appreciation for raid planning."[8]

General Vaught controlled the selection of his team from the outset. After meeting with officials in the Pentagon days after the initial event, Vaught reviewed the list already established by JTF planners and from the Special Operations Division Unconventional Warfare (SOD UW) branch. After review, Vaught made his own selections, adding a few officers and cutting others, including leaving key positions unfilled.[9] Two

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[5] Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission,* 28.

[6] Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976) 117.

[7] The inclination of government leaders to believe their own perspectives is studied widely in the field of sociology. "According to sociologist Robert Nisbet, individuals tend to maintain their current views and approaches to problems as long as existing methods result in reasonable success." James Clay Moltz, *The Politics of Space Security: Strategic Restraint and the Pursuit of National Interests*, Second edition (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011). 63.

[8] Rod Lenahan, *Crippled Eagle: A Historical Perspective of U.S. Special Operations, 1976-1996*, 1st ed (Charleston, S.C.; Miami, Fla: Narwhal Press, 1998). 34.

[9] Lenahan, *Crippled Eagle*, 35.

of the positions were important ones: the Chief of Staff and Director of Operations (J-3).[10] Colonel Jerry King, Chief of the SOD UW division, had been working in the role of J-3 from the outset. Vaught did consider bringing in other officers, including two who were attending Senior Service Schools. Although these officers were qualified and would have provided a perspective from outside the confines of the Pentagon, they were ultimately left in school because of "unwarranted questioning and speculation"[11] by other officers on the nature of their unanticipated departure from War College. As with command and control, the logic behind excessive OPSEC influenced what would otherwise have been prudent decisions and choices. After much consideration, Vaught decided to nominate Colonel Jerry King as the mission's Chief of Operations, or J-3.

Planning commenced in the context of these staffing choices. The already homogeneous group of officers selected from within their own organizational ranks within the Pentagon in their choice of Colonel King as the J-3. The J-3 position is a vital one in any Joint Operation including a special operation mission. Joint Publication 3-05, *Special Operations*, defines the role and importance of the J-3 in the following way: "The JSOTF J-3 assists the CDRJSOTF to plan, coordinate, synchronize, direct, control, monitor, and assess operations."[12] It goes on to assign to the J-3 responsibility for review and assessment of courses of action (COAs) and Operational Orders (OPORDs). Considering the importance of this position, an officer agnostic to the planning process may have proven a more beneficial choice. Chip and Dan Heath in their book *Decisive* call this concept the "outside view."[13] While the

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[10] Lenahan, *Crippled Eagle*, 35.
[11] Lenahan, *Crippled Eagle*, 35.
[12] "JP 3-05, Special Operations - jp3_05.pdf," accessed January 15, 2017, http://dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_05.pdf.
[13] Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work*, 1st ed (New York: Crown Business, 2013). 116-118.

RAM explains these staffing choices as a logic of consequence whereby decisions are made through exploring alternatives, expectations, and preferences, the long-term consequences to planning and rehearsal are best explored through other models of decision making.

An Alternative Perspective on Planning and Rehearsal:

Organizational Behavior Model

While the authors of various studies portray poor planning and lack of full-scale rehearsal as the consequence of Rational Actor Model choices by senior leaders at the Pentagon, organizational outputs of military bureaucracies of 1979-1980 also played a considerable role. The most acute example of organizational imperatives is seen in the selection, planning, and rehearsals of the tactical mobility platforms and crews for the RH-53 helicopters. No other element of the JTF led to as many planning considerations as the helicopters. Beyond the planning considerations, the helicopter element is most emblematic of the intersection of organizational imperatives and government politics.

Existing organized capabilities influence government choice. The existence of an organization increases the likelihood that the organization's output will be the choice of leadership and subsequently the government. From the outset, the selection and planning of the actual insertion of CAG and the Rangers into Tehran was subject of much debate. The desired insertion platforms were either not available or still in production. Planning discussions held early on examined the options of using of Army and Air Force helicopter pilots, who had extensive night flying and assault training. Planners looked at Air Force HH-53s as well, but their lack of shipboard components and inter-service maintenance challenges precluded this option.[14] Consequently, the

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[14] "At the time [of Operation Eagle Claw], the USAF had 114 pilots qualified on HH/CH-53s and another 86 with relatively recent experience on them." Darrel D. Whitcomb, *On a Steel Horse I Ride: A History of the MH-53 Helicopters in War and Peace* (Montgomery Al: Air University Press, 2012). 147.

selection of the Navy RH-53 can be explained using this aspect of the Organizational Behavior Model. In other words, the RH-53s represented an existing capability. While the choice was difficult for the task force based on the important role the helicopters played, in the end, the RH-53s were the only helicopters that met the operational requirements laid out by Vaught and his staff.

Organizational priorities shape organizational implementation. The RH-53 was chosen for its range, carrying capacity, and ship borne capabilities. These attributes, however, are not what set the crews' organizational priorities. In other words, while the helicopters met the empirical desires of the planners the capability did not change what the Navy crews trained for or brought to the mission. In fact, the main mission of the RH-53 was to "detonate acoustic and magnetic mines" and as a result "the helicopters towed a sled fitted with a generator and emitted electric energy through a trailing electrode or a noise device."[15] Thus the helicopter crews were trained minesweepers, not assault pilots trained and experienced in low visibility and nighttime operations. Allison and Zelikow assert organizations emphasize "the objectives most congruent to their special capacities and to the hierarchies of beliefs in the organization's culture."[16] To overcome the minesweeper pilots' lack of experience, the crews were paired with Marine pilots with helicopter assault capability and trained for the night mission. The foundational organizational priorities in the choice of the RH-53s, however, are hard to ignore.

Implementation reflects previously established routines. This proposition suggests standard operating procedures and routines hinder the ability to adapt to novel issues. The actions of organizations are thus the result of standard operating procedures (SOPs). While SOPs enable

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[15] Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 37.
[16] Graham T. Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed (New York: Longman, 1999). 177.

large organizations to accomplish complex tasks, they often hinder reactions to unusual or unplanned circumstances. The helicopter crews exemplify this proposition, most notably in the planning and execution phase of the rescue mission. The helicopter crews struggled to overcome previously established training routines, as a result of the mixed crews from the Navy and Marine Corps as well as the "new mission."[17] The mission demands were unlike any mission either service had flown before. The Delta Commander, Col Charles Beckwith, highlighted his concern in a memorandum to Major General Vaught in December of 1979, four months before mission execution, stating:

> YOU ARE WELL AWARE OF THE HELO PILOT PROBLEM. THEIR ABILITY TO FLY AT NIGHT DID NOT IMPROVE DURING YOUR ABSENCE. IN FACT, IT WAS FORTUNATE THAT WE DID NOT LOSE AN ELEMENT OF [CAG] AS A RESULT OF A HELO CRASH.[18]

Beckwith goes on to suggest another full-scale exercise, specifically involving all military players including the ground assault force, helicopters, operational mobility platforms (Air Force special operations MC-130 Combat Talons), and airborne fire support (Air Force AC-130 Specter) gunships.[19] This rehearsal never occurred. In sum, the helicopters struggled to overcome previous organizational imperatives and operating procedures, and because of the "ad-hoc" nature of their new organization, had no SOPs upon which to rely to ease the transition to the new more complicated mission set.

 Leaders neglect calculations of administrative feasibility. The selection of the appropriate number of helicopters to accomplish the operation exemplifies this proposition of the Organizational Behavior Model. A component of this model states that any project that asks an organization to depart from its designed purpose is rarely accomplished

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[17] U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report." August 1980.
[18] Format in original. Lenahan, *Crippled Eagle*, 66.
[19] Lenahan, Crippled Eagle, 66.

as leaders envision. Additionally, bringing together multiple organizations, each with their own routines and procedures, can produce dangerous consequences.[20] While the number of helicopters chosen was based on meteorological conditions,[21] number of assaulters, and expected maintenance issues, what leaders wanted and what happened did not align.

The demands for OPSEC explored in previous chapters by senior White House leaders encouraged planners to use the smallest force "footprint" operationally feasible.[22] As officers on the planning staff developed a better understanding of the mission requirements, it was clear to them that the number of helicopters had to be increased to accommodate Beckwith's assaulters. Eventually, however, military commanders and planners became mired in administrative feasibility. Colonel Charles Pitman, the helicopter element commander, claimed Beckwith said, "that if a commander needs two helicopters, then, because of their unpredictability, he actually needs three."[23] The two officers then informed Major General Vaught that six helicopters represented the minimum requirement at Desert One, the remote landing site, to proceed with the mission. These decisions were made under the assumption that the USS *Nimitz,* the carrier from which the operation would launch, would have nine RH-53s on board. The Holloway Commission members revealed a planning risk analysis on the appropriate number of helicopters, but "an unconstrained planner would have more than likely required 10 helicopters, 11 under the most likely case, and up to 12 using peacetime historical data."[24] But why did government and military leaders proceed with so few helicopters?

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[20] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 179.
[21] U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report," 8.
[22] Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 38.
[23] Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 38.
[24] U.S. Defense Department, "Rescue Mission Report."

The Organizational Behavior Model offers an answer to this question. The model suggests, and the case study confirms, that leaders ignored administrative feasibility. The intersection of excessive OPSEC, compartmentalized planning, and bargaining between military players within the operation led to decisions based on organizational imperatives, rather than what was feasible. For instance, Beckwith claimed in November of 1983 that he was "later" told "that eleven helicopters could have been positioned on the hanger deck [of the *Nimitz*]"[25] The convergence of political players stressing a minimum signature for OPSEC reasons clashed with the joint force organization not yet doctrinally solidified. Decision makers both at the national command level and at the general officer level ignored administrative feasibility, a point most acute in the selection, training, and implementation of the helicopter crews.

The organizational inputs into the planning process culminated in the lack of a full-scale rehearsal. Rehearsals did occur but on a small scale. The dynamic nature of planning and operational considerations, however, ensured the Joint Force was never brought together to rehearse a comprehensive and solidified plan. Despite these challenges, crews could and did train together, such as the C-130s and RH-53s. Based on OPSEC concerns, however, the crews rarely, if ever, conducted face-to-face debriefings. General Vaught, a seasoned SOF veteran, must have understood the importance of a full-scale rehearsal, so why did he allow the complex mission to go on without one? The Government Politics Model provides an answer to that question.

Government Politics Model

Who plays? The Government Politics Model places emphasis on the individual players in the national security game. Consequently,

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[25] Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 39.

groups of players make up the agents for government decisions.[26] General Vaught's locus of responsibility in the planning and execution of Operation Eagle Claw had a disproportionate impact on government decisions and operational execution. In other words, General Vaught's input's resonated both up and down the chain of command. Unlike modern Joint Task Force structures, Operation Eagle Claw lacked an obligatory point of passage. This academic term means that at times, little information made it up to General Vaught from the operational crews, and often information did not make it down to the crews from General Vaught. The outcome of this disparity was the lack of full understanding by both the strategic players and the operational executors of the plan. General Vaught's role as both an influential player to his government masters, and the operational authority to his tactical operators, proved costly in the planning of Operation Eagle Claw.

At this point, one might ask why the tactical operators did not question the feasibility of their operations more deliberately. Barry Posen, author of *The Sources of Military Doctrine,* offers an explanation. In articulating the specialization between soldier and statesmen, Posen asserts, "As a rule, soldiers are not going to go out of their way to reconcile the means they employ with the ends of state policy."[27] He goes on to posit that soldiers will elevate technical requirements over the needs of civilian policy.[28] The Holloway Commission members attributed poor planning to the excessive OPSEC and opaque C2. While not incorrect, the Government Politics Model highlights the need for someone in the middle, an agent, working on behalf of General Vaught to connect the tactical operations to the strategic desires. The level of influence General Vaught exerted could have benefited from an operator in the

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[26] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 296.
[27] Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca: Cornell Univ.Pr, 1984). 53.
[28] Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine*, 53.

middle, particularly in the air domain, to connect the strategy to tactical implementation.

What factors shape players' perceptions, preference, and stance on the issue? Parochial goals, perceptions, and deadlines impact decisions. Furthermore, deadlines force "busy players" in the national security game such as General Vaught to take a stance, often one agnostic to actual capabilities. General Vaught's position forced him to take on different facets of the issue. Different factors had multiple meanings. For example, Col Beckwith's desire for redundancy in the helicopter force meant multiple things to General Vaught. Vaught understood the tactical necessity of backup vertical lift. Vaught also understood the strategic implications of placing the appropriate Navy aircraft carrier in the region for operational security concerns. To make matters worse, Vaught was encumbered by the timelines of the Carter Administration which were often in flux based on the unpredictable nature diplomacy, particularly in times of crisis.

What determines each player's impact on results? Players' impact on results is based on their bargaining power and their willingness to use it.[29] In other words, how persuasive are government players at leveraging their position? This question is useful to understand how General Vaught could have influenced the planning process. Countless official memorandums from Col Beckwith to General Vaught place emphasis on operational and planning shortfalls. For example, in a site report written in November of 1979, Beckwith emphasizes that "we must not allow mission support, such as Helos, MC130 Combat Talons, and Spectre Gunships, to dictate the phasing of the ground tactical plan instead of supporting the plan."[30]

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[29] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision.*
[30] Lenahan, *Crippled Eagle*, 54.

There is no doubt General Vaught was acutely aware of the planning problems, it is unclear, however, how willing he was to use his bargaining power while briefing senior officials on the readiness of the military courses of action. As previously discussed, no intermediate organizational mechanism existed to counter his perceptions of the planning and preparation of the mission. With no separate team outside of the planning process to question and analyze the feasibility of the plan, General Vaught was left to rely on his own experiences. His rationalization of mission feasibility was manifest in his limited briefings to government officials.

How does the game combine players' stands, influence, and moves to yield governmental decisions and actions? Actions and decisions in government are connected to the player's power, and that position links them to action channels, which is "a regularized means of taking governmental action on a specific kind of issue."[31] These "action channels" bring structure to the game by predetermining the major players. This assertion does not come without pitfalls as an asymmetry occurs within this structure. The asymmetry is based on whose channel acts. The asymmetry of General Vaught's decision power in the planning and execution of Operation Eagle Claw was immense. His "action channels" were predetermined based on not only his position but the lack of questioning by an outside organization. The JCS considered establishing a small team of specifically selected individuals to review plans as they developed. However, "the idea of panel experts was abandoned, as the Holloway Commission investigators revealed, because of an overriding fear of breaching security."[32] The decision to not form a team to review plans made General Vaught's action channel both powerful and myopic.

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[31] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 300.
[32] Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 29.

Tying it all Together—The Models Intersect

The intersection of both decision-making models leads to two important conclusions on *why* the rescue mission failed, and more specifically on how it was planned. First, the Organizational Behavior Model highlighted that existing capabilities influence government choice, and leaders neglect calculations of administrative feasibility.[33] These assertions were most acutely seen in the disposition of the helicopter force. Second, the Government Politics Model exposed just how much power players had in the national security game. Major General Vaught exemplifies just such a power player.

When these conclusions are combined, a clearer picture emerges on *why* the rescue mission's planning was crippled from the outset. Organizational capabilities did not exist to provide appropriate estimates to government leaders. In addition, the "ad hoc" helicopter crews lacked standard operating procedures. When faced with novel problems, the crews had no predetermined training patterns and habits upon which to rely. In other words, the organization was not equipped to self-assess, let alone report those deficiencies to higher headquarters. The lack of existing capabilities combined with the asymmetric power given to players in the "ad hoc" organizational structure proved causal in the error chain for the failed rescue attempt.

Conclusion

While the RAM reaches similar conclusions on *how* and *why* poor planning occurred, the other models provide more predictive and explanatory power for application to future special operations missions. As SOF continues to expand, as seen during the last two presidential administrations, organizational imperatives, culture, and operating procedures will require time to solidify. This point is even more acute if

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[33] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision.*

one considers the development of new technologies, such as Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) and tilt-rotor technologies that fundamentally change operational employment. While General Vaught may have been an expert in SOF techniques, it is not a stretch to assume his conceptual understanding of the complexities of the helicopter operations may have been lacking. The gulf between tactical employment and strategic decisions can be overcome using "red teams," "what if" planning iterations, and a staff equipped to manage problems for the Commander. General Vaught, due to excessive OPSEC, opaque C2, and an "ad hoc" organizational structure manifested through lack of planning, had none of those tools to draw from. Senior leaders must recognize the tension between the growth of SOF quantity—and the attrition of SOF quality to meet the demands of the national command authority.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This study has confirmed that understanding *why* strategic decisions are made in government, particularly in times of national crisis, can better explain *how* operational and tactical actions transpire. Consequently, the Government Politics and Organizational Behavior Models provide explanatory and predictive power for future SOF applications. Previous explanations of Operation Eagle Claw have focused on the tactical missteps, often at the expense of the larger strategic narrative. Further, most explanations assume a Rational Actor Model framework of decision making, whereby government leaders rationalized decisions based on the logic of consequence.[1] While not entirely incorrect, these explanations are insufficient at explaining *why* events unfolded the way they did.

Though this study treated each model separately, in reality all three were in operation and the most noteworthy conclusions lie at their intersection. The fixation for secrecy by President Carter and Dr. Brzezinski penetrated all aspects of the operation from the "ad-hoc" organizational structure to the insufficient planning. The Organizational Behavior Model highlighted the organizational shortfalls of the "hollow force" following Vietnam. Regardless of the political imperatives for OPSEC the military was not sufficiently organized, particularly for SOF operations, to manage the dynamic mission asked of them. The intersection of organizational imperatives by the military and government politics indicates a mission that regardless of preparation would have been challenged by the political and organizational imperatives present in 1979-1980.

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[1] James G. March, *A Primer on Decision Making: How Decisions Happen* (New York: Free Press, 2010).

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After further examination, the decision-making models of Allison and Zelikow do provide more explanatory power on *why* Operation Eagle Claw failed. This assertion does not mean the models have the monopoly on truth. However, the other models do provide alternative explanations to the RAM, and in some cases, provide predictive measures for future SOF operations. The most salient of these conclusions is evident in the conclusions on opaque C2. The evidence suggested by the Government Politics Model points to the Carter Administration's excessive OPSEC concerns as the primary causal mechanism of mission failure. Excessive OPSEC drove the opaque command and control as General Officers were forced to adhere to the political imperatives of secrecy coming from major players in Carter's National Security team. The result of these imperatives led to inadequate planning, but more importantly, insufficient independent review of the plans. A gulf existed between what government leaders assumed was administratively feasible and what was tactically possible.

Operation Eagle Claw was a noteworthy example of the blurred operational lines created by special operations missions. Unlike conventional military operations, where the operational or theater level of war creates separate lines between strategy and tactics, SOF missions compress this heuristic, skipping the operational level of conflict, particularly in times of national crisis. This concept means strategic decisions reach all the way down to tactical application. Operation Eagle Claw, while not the first clandestine operation, was one of the first of its kind in modern government. Cold War politics and policies may have driven foreign policy and force structure, but the strategic value of the hostages for American prestige and President Carter's foreign policy goals cannot be understated. The result of the blurred strategic and tactial lines was manifest in the Government Politics Model, and resulted in excessive OPSEC. The result was Dr. Brzezinski's role in military planning, and General Vaught's reaction to these organizational and

political imperatives. What do these results convey to policy makers as SOF continues to grow in both size and operational relevancy?

Implications

Organizational Behavior Lessons (SOF Growth)

Allison and Zelikow submit, "Coordination among organizations is much less finely tuned than leaders demand or expect. The Prescription: Considerable thought must be given to the routines established in the principal organizations before a crisis so that during the crisis organizations will be capable of adequately performing the needed functions. In a crisis, the overwhelming problem will be that of control and coordination of large organizations."[2] During the Obama administration, SOF have grown exponentially in personnel.[3] Concurrently the budget grew from about six billion dollars to nearly eleven billion dollars.[4] This growth, combined with a high operational tempo, and the increase in sub-state actors across the globe signals a continued expansion in SOF personnel over the coming years. Operation Eagle Claw did not have the advantage of a specially trained organization equipped with the most modern military technology or the benefit of a Theater Special Operations Command (TSOC) staffed to maintain OPSEC and C2. Thirty years later, the organizational imperatives of SOF may be encumbered by the problem sets facing large bureaucracies. General Raymond Thomas, in his recent testimony to Congress, noted, "If confirmed [as USSOCOM Commander], I intend to continue the efforts of my predecessors by maintaining personnel and operational tempos that provide predictability to the forces and families. The command's policy is

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[2] Graham T. Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed (New York: Longman, 1999). 396.
[3] Alexander Powell, "Advice from SOF on the Use of SOF for the Next Administration," Occasional Paper Series (Arlington, Va: CNA, October 2016).
[4] Powell, "Advice from SOF on the Use of SOF for the Next Administration."

that SOF will be at home no less than one-third of the time during a two-year period."[5] Given SOF's growing mission set and General Thomas's dwell time goals it seems unlikely SOF will be downsizing anytime soon.

If SOF continues to grow, senior leaders should be aware of the organizational pitfalls associated with large organizations. In other words, expect organizational missteps, like those seen in Eagle Claw. For instance, one of General Thomas's priorities is to remain agile and flexible. While not impossible in larger organizations, the Organizational Behavior Model indicates the execution of choices may be encumbered by the rigidity of operating procedures necessary to accomplish tasks in large bureaucracies. Beyond organizational pitfalls, senior leaders must recognize the tension between the growth of SOF quantity, at the expense of its quality.

Government Politics Model (Who Plays Matters)

"Positions define what players both may and must do."[6] Allison and Zelikow go on to suggest, "Individuals become players in the national security game by occupying a position in the major channels for producing action on national security issues. For example, in the U.S. government the players include *Chiefs*: the president, the secretaries of State, Defense and Treasury, the director of the CIA, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the President's National Security Adviser…"[7] President Trump's staffing picks, as they have been for many administrations, were the subject of contentious debate. The implications of this assertion for SOF employment are noteworthy. As previously mentioned, the strategic consequences of SOF missions make the players in the national security game a vital aspect of SOF employment. Consider the iconic image of President Obama and his

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[5] U.S. Government, "Advance Policy Questions for Lieutenant General Raymond A. Thomas" March 9, 2016.
[6] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 297.
[7] Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 296.

national security team huddled around Brigadier General "Brad" Webb during the raid that killed Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The shrinking of strategy and tactics is apparent in the highly publicized image. The political turmoil associated with all presidential transitions often comes at the expense of military expediency and logic in decision making. President Trump's first one hundred days have been no exception to this rule.

Policy makers must recognize the tension between government politics and the necessity of stability for the execution of SOF missions in opaque political environments. General Thomas noted after former General Michael Flynn stepped down as National Security Advisor in February of 2017, "Our government continues to be in unbelievable turmoil. I hope they sort it out soon because we're a nation at war."[8] The necessity for stability in the national security game is vital for future SOF employment. The Government Politics Model asserts players do not focus on consistent strategic objectives, but rather to varying conceptions of strategic goals and aims. The compression of the strategic aims and tactical employment are particularly acute for the SOF mission set. As SOF continues to expand, in both numbers and missions, the tactical excellence currently relished may not be sufficient to overcome political imperatives. An examination of Operation Eagle Claw displays just how acute small decisions at the strategic level can impact tactical operations. As USSOCOM celebrates its thirtieth anniversary this year a reexamination of SOF truths in the modern strategic environment warrants further analysis.

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[8] Carlo Munoz. "Raymond Thomas: Elite U.S. force 'staying focused' on counterterror fight, despite NSC shakeup." The Washington Times 14 February 2017.

Recommendations

Reassess SOF Truths

Today, the realignment of SOF truths with organizational realities is imperative for facing modern strategic puzzles. While quality is better than quantity, and special operations should not be mass produced, what does this statement mean to the 70,000 members of the SOF enterprise in 2017? The Organizational Behavior Model indicates large bureaucracies are often constrained by routines and SOPs necessary for large organizations to function. It appears by solving one problem, SOF growth to meet SOF demand, USSOCOM has created another, a large bureaucracy susceptible to organizational pitfalls. To overcome this challenge, soldiers and politicians alike must reexamine warfighting strategies that do not rely on SOF to "go it alone," a sentiment shared by General Thomas in his recent request for more conventional forces in Afghanistan that would lessen the need for SOF to continue conducting dangerous raids. Although his proposition transfers some risk and responsibility to conventional forces, the concept is a step in the right direction. A bottom line assessment of SOF strategy, paired with a Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) should aid in determining the "right size" for USSOCOM. In the meantime, a continued focus on flatter organizational structures at the lower echelons can supplant the pitfalls of large bureaucracies.

Incentivize Dissent

Thomas Schelling notes in his book *Arms and Influence*, "it is a tradition in military planning to attend to an enemy's capabilities, not his intentions."[9] In other words, the military focuses on tactics at the expense of strategy. This assertion was seen in the planning and

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[9] Thomas Schelling, Arms and Influence: With a New Preface and Afterword. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008) 35.

execution of Eagle Claw displaying how SOF missions blur the lines of strategy and tactics making Schelling's words even more relevant. To overcome the tactical blinders at the expense of strategy SOF planners and strategist must operate in an environment where dissent is incentivized. The avoidance of self-reinforcing organizations susceptible to the pitfalls of cognitive consistency is a requirement for cogent SOF strategies. Leaders must be comfortable with disagreement to reach sound strategies and consider the validity of outside views. Incentivizing disagreement is vital to the development of SOF strategies.

Final Thoughts

It is somewhat remarkable that Operation Eagle Claw resonates so much today. Although the organization of SOF is vastly different today, the way in which government decisions are made appears unchanged. On the one hand, a completely new paradigm exists for SOF under the joint structure of USSOCOM. On the other hand, USSOCOM is a player in government politics, and vulnerable to the push and pull of decision making mired in the "business as usual" attitude. This statement is particularly acute if one considers the friction associated with President Trump's first National Security Advisor. While his replacement, General H.R. McMaster, is schooled in the field of strategic studies and has even written a book on the relationship of soldier and statesmen, he is not immune to the fundamentals of government politics and organizational imperatives. Consequently, the likelihood of another highly politicized SOF mission occurring is predictable in the current geopolitical landscape. While USSOCOM boasts highly trained and equipped operators, escaping the pitfalls of large organizations and government politics must be managed to avoid future calamities caused by the push and pull of government leaders—managing this dilemma will characterize the future of SOF employment.

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